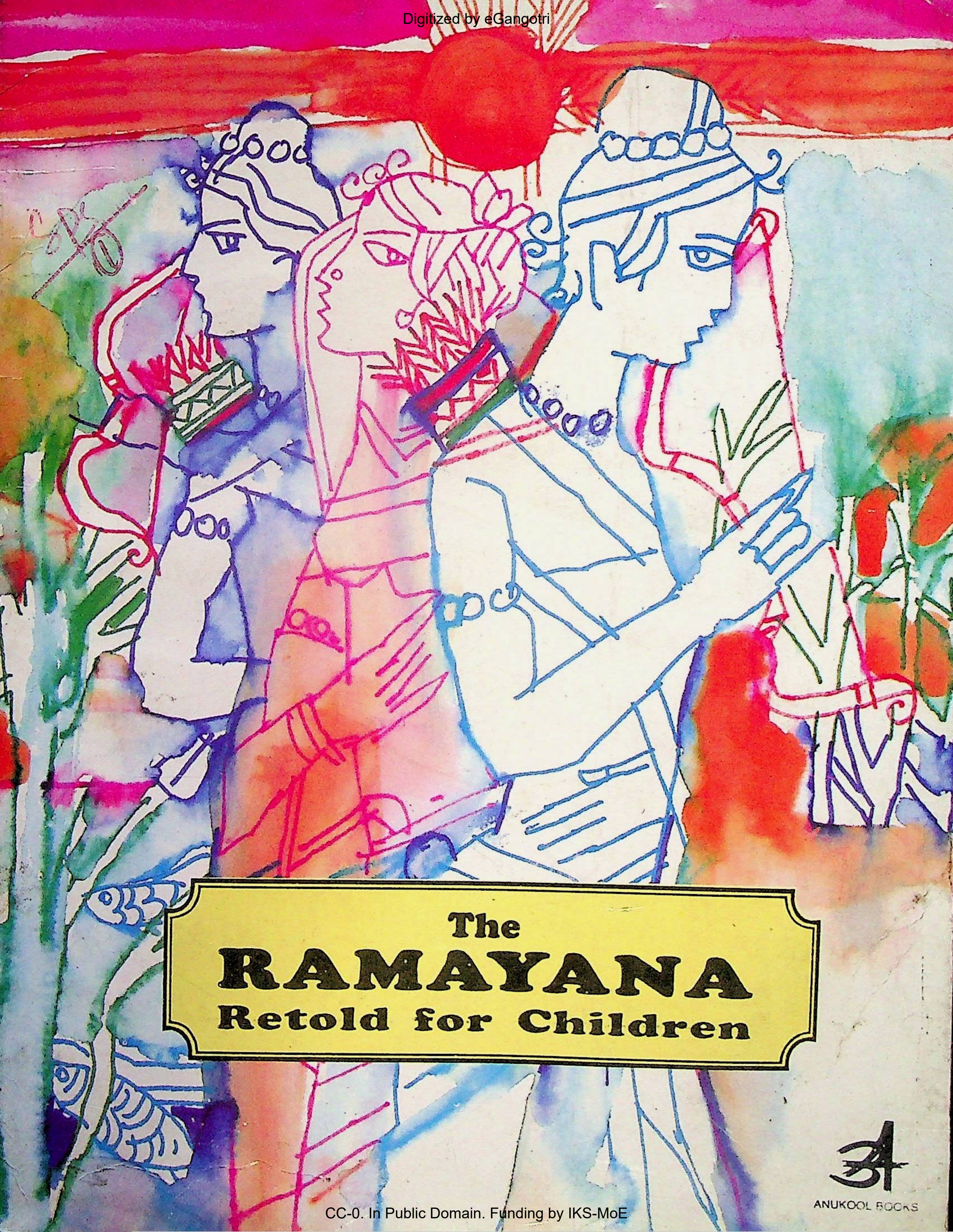

The RAMAYANA
Retold for Children

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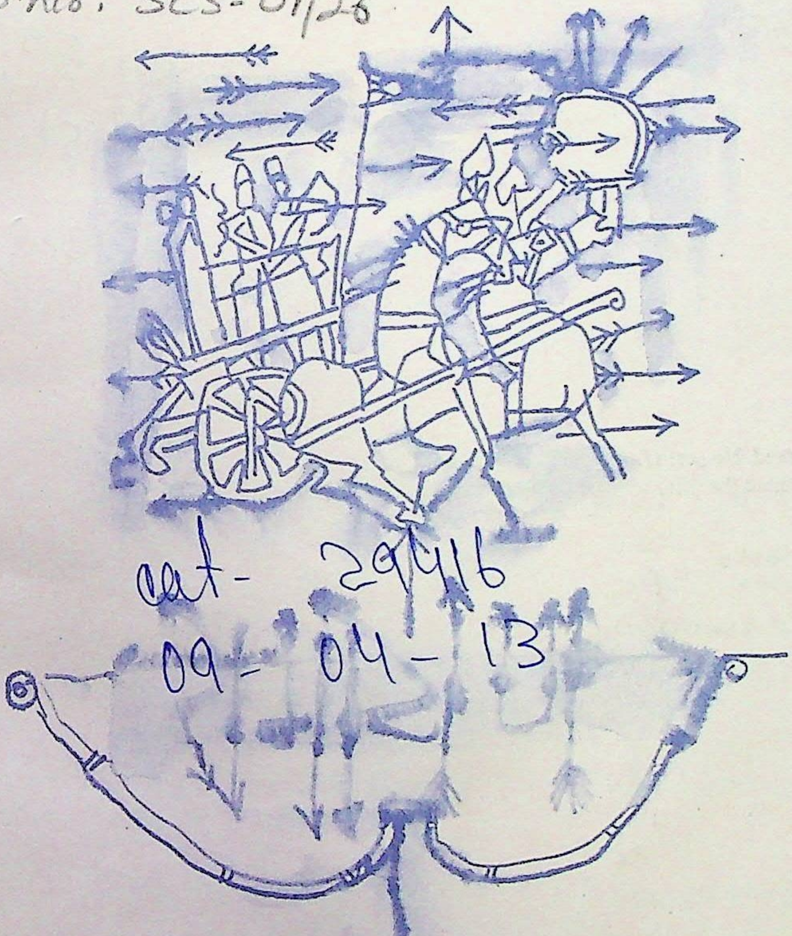

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Preface

THE two great Hindu epics—the Ramayana by Valmiki and the Mahabharata by Vyas—have had a special bearing on the culture and civilization of India, down the ages. Together, they embody the spirit and essence of the Indian cultural heritage. In a very general way of speaking, both—originally written in Sanskrit—are narratives of ambition and intrigues in royal courts, renunciation, and a final battle in which the good triumph over the wicked.

Valmiki's Ramayana, which comprises 25,000 verses, is accepted to have been written somewhere between 1500 BC to 200 BC. Revered all over the country as a religious text, the story of Prince Rama of Ayodhya, the model of perfect behaviour, has inspired innumerable literary works, translations (as by Tulsidas and Kumban), and plays for 2000 years. Rama's exploits are still celebrated in religious festivals, temple rituals, public holidays and private ceremonies. Places where he walked are visited by the devout as places of pilgrimage. Bharata, is the ideal brother. His selflessness has been a source of inspiration to all generations and continues to be so.

Ramayana is the portrayal of good triumphing over evil. The inner kernel of the Ramayana is relevant to us even in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Therein lies its greatness; therein lies its sacredness.

The Mahabharata is a later, more complex work than the Ramayana and is the story of a dynastic struggle culminating in a battle between two sides of the same family. The Mahabharata is supposed to have been composed between second century BC and second century AD. In the 100,000-versed Mahabharata, it is said that although what is found in this epic may be found elsewhere, but what is not in this text, is not to be found anywhere else.

These two epics, with their masterly use of mythological references, folk-lore, instruction and a host of literary devices, embody the finest in Hindu thought and wisdom. Their authors have sought to reach the mind, heart and soul of the reader. Today, as for centuries past, they continue to give a sense of direction and meaning to human life. Specially retold here for children, their simple stories help to instil in them a sense of morality and spiritual alertness in life.

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1

How the Ramayana Came to be Written

THE Mahabharata and the Ramayana are the two great epics of India. An epic is a long poem that tells of the deeds of great and heroic men. The Greek epics "Iliad" and "Odyssey" are well known. They are loved , studied and read all over the world. The Mahabharata and the Ramayana are loved and studied all over the world too. They were written by sages. A sage is a wise old man. The Mahabharata was written by Ved Vyas and the Ramayana was written by Valmiki.

Greek and Roman mythologies are full of stories about their gods and goddesses. Similarly, there are gods and goddesses in Hindu mythology too. Hindus believe that God, who created the Universe, has three different manifestations or sides to his character. He is Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver and Shiva the Destroyer. Brahma created the world while Vishnu looks after its well-being. However, if people become too wicked in their ways and do not care for *dharma* or the right code of conduct, Shiva destroys them. Then a whole new generation is created again.

There are other gods and goddesses too, like Indra the god of the heavens; Vayu the god of the winds; Agni the god of fire; Yama the god of death and so on. Many of these gods granted boons or wishes to humans and to *rakshasas* or demons if they were pleased with them. Many human beings and rakshasas performed *tapasya* or penance to achieve their aspirations. For instance, Vishwamitra was a man who did a great deal of severe tapasya. He became a *rishi* or saint and though he failed a few times, he finally achieved what he wanted. He became known as "Brahmarishi Vishwamitra". People were very afraid of him. He had miraculous powers and if anyone made him angry, he could curse them. Whatever he said would happen to them, really happened.

There was once a rakshasa or demon with similar powers. His name was Ravana and he ruled over a kingdom called Lanka. Ravana had done so much tapasya that Brahma had been forced to grant him a boon. He appeared before Ravana and asked, "What do you want?"

"Oh Great Brahma!" Ravana replied, "make me so strong that neither the gods, the rakshasas, the *yakshas* nor *gandharvas* can destroy me."

Yakshas were half or demi-gods and gandharvas were singers who lived in the skies. Ravana had indeed asked for a very powerful boon. Brahma granted it. With the granting of this boon, Ravana became very proud. He became arrogant, harsh and very sure of himself. "I can never be destroyed," he boasted. He became tyrannical and cruel. When he became really intolerable, the gods felt he had to be destroyed. They thought of Brahma and he appeared before them.

"What is it that you want?" he asked.

"Oh Brahma, please destroy Ravana," they begged. "You have given this boon to him. Neither we nor the rakshasas nor yakshas nor the gandharvas can destroy him."

But there was one mistake Ravana had made. He had been so confident of his strength that he had not asked for protection from mortals. Vishnu appeared before the gods and said, "I shall be born into the world as a mortal and I shall destroy Ravana." So Vishnu came into the world as Prince Rama, son of King Dasharatha, and we shall see what happened.

Once, Rishi Valmiki was sitting in a forest near a river when he saw two birds on a tree, pecking and billing and cooing to each other.

"How absolutely beautiful they are!" he thought.

Suddenly, an arrow shot by some hunter killed the male bird. When the female saw her companion die, she screamed loudly, flapped her wings, fell down and still crying out, died too. Valmiki was very upset. In his heart, there was a sense of great sorrow. He felt angry towards the hunter who had so unthinkingly and cruelly killed an innocent bird.*

Then Valmiki thought about the cruel ways of the world and meditated on Brahma who appeared before him.

"Oh great Brahma!" cried Valmiki. "Why did I have to see that poor bird die? My heart bleeds for it. I cannot rest, I am filled with a terrible grief."

"Ah," Brahma replied. "When your mind is sad and your heart cries inside you, you will find compassion and poetical phrases. Write the story of Rama's life. Write about his uprighteous behaviour and his deeds of valour; and people will listen to it and weep. The wise will understand and learn dharma and Lord Rama will be loved and worshipped for thousands and thousands of years to come. As long as the world exists and people live, Lord Rama's name and your name will be remembered."

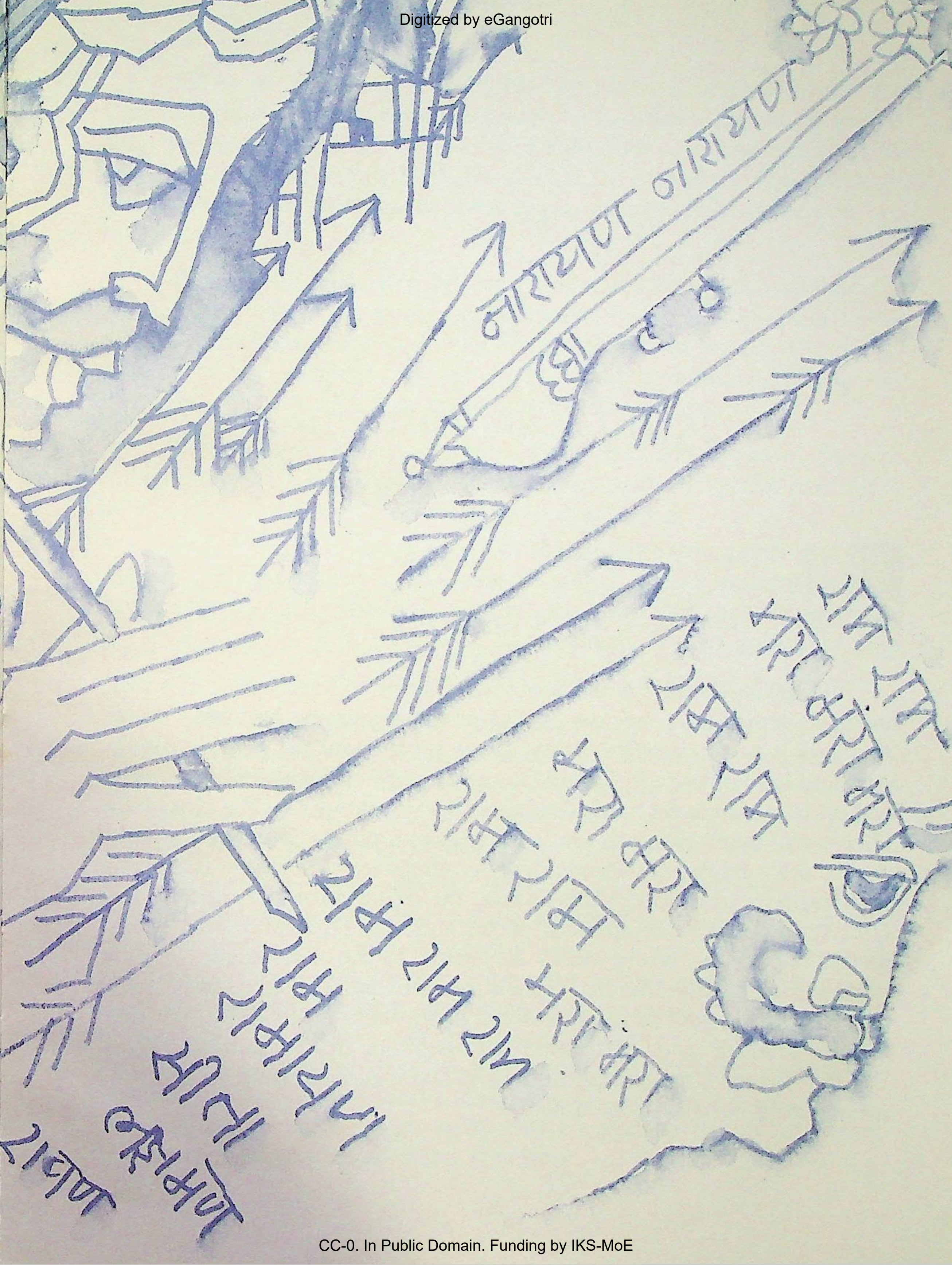
So Valmiki closed his eyes, thought, and began to write the Ramayana.

---

* In a sudden outburst, he sang:

"मा निषाद प्रतिष्ठां त्वमगमः शाश्वती समाः।
यत् क्रौंच मिथुनादेकमवधीः काम-मोहितम्।।"

"O hunter! May you ne'er be blest, nor reach the realms of timeless rest.
For you have rent this *krauncha* (little bird) fair, when he was joined in love most rare."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राम
रामायण
सीता
हनुमान
रावण

2

King Dasharatha

Many, many years ago, in North India, north of River Ganges, was a kingdom called Kosala. It was a very prosperous and happy kingdom indeed. Its capital was known as Ayodhya and it was ruled over by a king named Dasharatha.

King Dasharatha was a wise and good man. Descended from the ancient *Suryavanshis,* he was proud of his ancestors, and his capital, Ayodhya was a magnificent city. There were beautiful palaces for the king and his nobles, comfortable houses for the citizens, lovely temples and wide, well-paved roads. The river Sarayu flowed by the city walls. There were many orchards and green fields, food was plentiful, and the people were happy and contended. Ayodhya was a fortress-like strong city and was unconquerable. In fact, the name Ayodhya means "that which can never be conquered." Taxes were light and punishment was meted out to the wrong-doers according to the seriousness of their crimes. King Dasharatha had eight wise ministers who advised him and helped him to govern his kingdom. There were other Brahmins who taught dharma and performed all religious duties and sacrifices. Dharma means correct religious values and code of behaviour and how men should behave at all times.

However, in the midst of all this happiness, King Dasharatha was very unhappy. This was because though he had three queens, he had no son. He longed for a son who would rule after him and carry on his name. So after pondering deeply, he decided to perform a *yagna*. A yagna was a special, sacred religious ceremony in which sacrifices were offered to the gods.

Dasharatha consulted his advisors and a day was fixed for the yagna. Since a yagna is a very important event, a special sacrificial altar was built and decorated with precious stones and jewels. Kings and princes of the neighbouring kingdoms were invited. Ayodhya was certainly a very bright and happy city that day.

There was great excitement in the air. The rishis or priests chanted sacred mantras; sweet music was emanating from the gentle jingling of bells and flowers were strewn all along the streets.

When the ceremony began, all the people looked on, quiet and respectful. Suddenly, a sage or wise man appeared with a bowl of *payasam*. Payasam is a kind of sweet pudding made with rice, milk and sugar. The sage held it out to the king. "Oh King," he said, "let each of your three queens eat a portion of this, and they will bear you sons."

Dasharatha was delighted and took the bowl gratefully. He gave a little payasam to each of his three queens, Kaushalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyi. First Kaushalya had half the payasam, and half of what was left was given to Sumitra. Then half of that (that is one eighth) was given to Kaikeyi and the remaining eighth was again given to Sumitra.

After some time, all the three queens gave birth to sons. Kaushalya's son was the eldest and was named Rama, Kaikeyi's son was called Bharata and Sumitra's twins were called Lakshmana and Shatrughna. When they grew up, how strong and good looking they were! All four were taught archery along with religious and social duties by the rishis. The princes were obedient and devoted to their parents, but Rama was the best. He was not only radiant looking, but pious, extremely dutiful, loving, kind and generous. Rama was the light of King Dasharatha's life. The people of Ayodhya loved all the princes very much, but they, too, loved Rama the most.

3

Rama

One day, the sage Vishwamitra, about whom we read earlier, came to Ayodhya. He was a very powerful and well known sage. Having done severe tapasya or penance for many years, he knew many *mantras* or prayers and most people were afraid of him. King Dasharatha stepped down from his throne and came forward to greet him.

"O great sage, this is an unexpected honour!" Dasharatha said to him, because he had not known that Vishwamitra was coming. "I am indeed fortunate and happy that you have paid a visit to my capital. Please do let me know what I can do for you and it shall be done at once."

Vishwamitra thanked King Dasharatha. Then he explained why he had come. "I am contemplating doing more tapasya, even more difficult penance and sacrifices than I have done before; but there are two she-demons, Maricha and Sabahu, who come and interrupt my tapasya. I want you to send your son Rama to kill them."

King Dasharatha's face became very pale. He was very upset when he heard this. "Why?" he asked himself. "Oh, why did I offer to grant any wish that Vishwamitra might ask?"

Unaware of Dasharatha's feelings, said, Vishwamitra, "It is very kind of you, to have offered to fulfil my wishes even before I made them."

Dasharatha did not answer. He was wondering how he could possibly send his beloved son Rama to fight the demons. Rama was still a boy, only 16 years old, and demons were extremely dangerous. "Rama is only a young boy," he said at last. "You may take my army with you."

"You offered to grant my wish, King Dasharatha. I want Rama to come with me. I do not want your army," replied Vishwamitra angrily.

The courtiers trembled with fear. Vishwamitra was a powerful sage. If he lost his temper, he would curse them all. Why did the king not agree? At last, King Dasharatha nodded his head. It was decided that Rama and Lakshmana would both go with Vishwamitra. So the two princes set out with him.

They travelled to ,the bank of the river Sarayu and here Vishwamitra told them to bathe in its waters. Then he said," I shall teach you some special mantras. When you recite them you will feel strong and you will be able to control your sleep, hunger and thirst." Both Rama and Lakshmana learnt the mantras and as they recited them, they could feel strength flowing into their bodies.

They crossed the river and found on the other bank a large, dark forest. The cries of the wild animals were almost deafening.

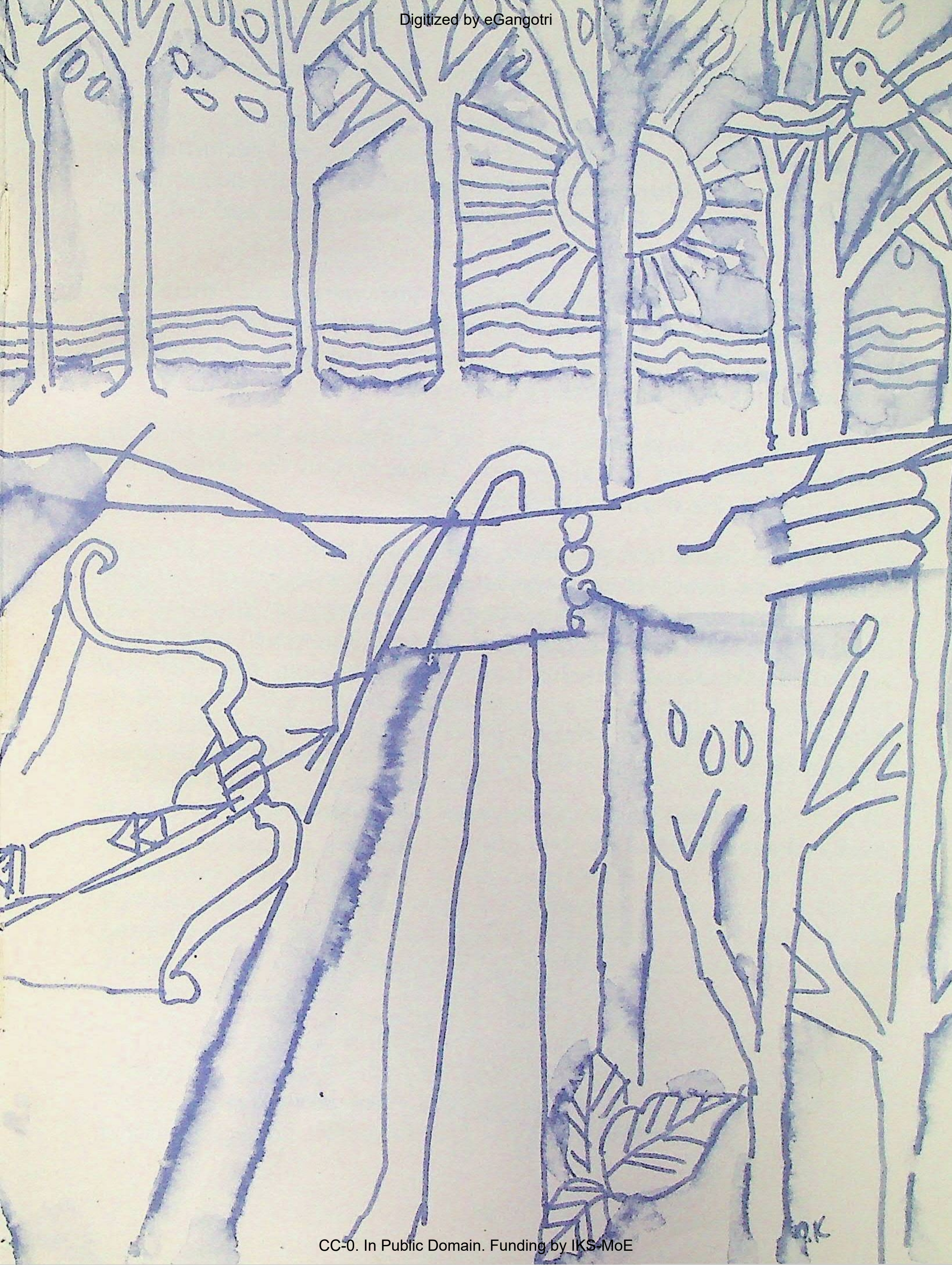
"Here lives Taraka, a *rakshasi,* who terrorises the entire forest," explained Vishwamitra. "Kill her and free the forest of her evil presence."

Taraka heard Rama and Lakshmana. She heard the twanging of their bows and sent a rock hurling through the air.

"Who dares to come with bows and arrows into my forest?" she screamed.

Rama and Lakshmana split the rock with their bows and arrows. Then Taraka made herself invisible by magic and tried to hurl more boulders and stones on them. The princes could not see her but, guided by sound, they shot arrows into her body and finally killed Taraka.

"Well done! Well done!" exclaimed Vishwamitra. "You have done a great service to mankind. I bless you and I shall now give you divine



weapons which will help you to conquer all your enemies."

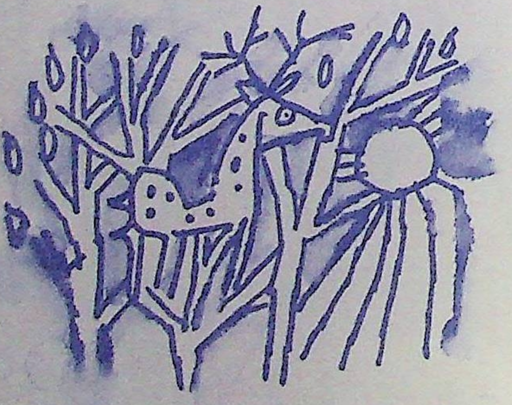
This done, Vishwamitra led them to another forest. Here was the ashram or hermitage where he lived with other sages and performed his penance. The sylvan surroundings of the ashram lent to it a rare serenity. The other sages were delighted to meet the two princes and led them inside.

"I shall start my rituals tomorrow," Vishwamitra told them. The next day, as Rama and Lakshmana watched over, he sat down and went into a trance. They sat guard near him for five days. Vishwamitra continued thus without speaking to anyone.

"It is five days now, since the Brahmarishi has started his penance," Rama said to Lakshmana. "I feel certain the demons will attack tonight. We must be extra alert now."

Just as Rama had predicted, after some time, a large group of demons came to where the sage sat. They threw blood on the altar, screamed and made loud noises. There were so many of them hovering in the air that the place became as dark as night. Rama used his weapons and killed Maricha and Sabahu, the two main demons first. Then with his arrows, he killed the others. Lakshmana helped him. When all the demons were dead, a strange peace descended upon the forest. Vishwamitra was very pleased.

"Now, I shall be able to continue my penance undisturbed," he said and again blessed the two princes.



4

King Janaka

Thus Vishwamitra completed his tapasya in peace. When the princes came to him the next day, he said, "I want to take you to the kingdom of Mithila. Let us go there and see the wonderful bow of Lord Shiva. King Janaka, the ruler of Mithila, has proclaimed that the man who can string that bow shall marry his daughter Sita."

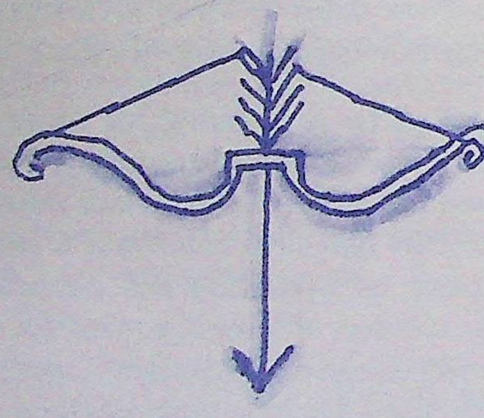
So all three set out. After journeying for about three days, they came to another ashram. They stopped here for a while. "This is where the sage Gautama cursed his wife Ahalya," said Vishwamitra to them. "He turned her to stone. She has been like that for thousands of years. When Gautama cursed her, he said, 'You will become a human being again only when Rama, the son of King Dasharatha, passes this way.' So Rama, come and liberate Ahalya." Rama and Lakshmana entered the hermitage. They saw the stone Ahalya and bent down to touch her feet. At once Ahalya came to life again. She fell at Rama's feet in gratitude and thanked him.

Vishwamitra and the two princes then continued their journey. When they reached Mithila, King Janaka, hurried out to greet them. "Welcome to my kingdom, O great sage," he said. "I see you have two handsome young men with you. Who are they?"

"They are Rama and Lakshmana," said Vishwamitra, "the sons of King Dasharatha of Ayodhya. They came with me to my ashram, and killed the demons who would not let me complete my tapasya. Will you allow them to see the wonderful bow of Shiva?"

King Janaka nodded. That very day, Rama and Lakshmana were able to see the bow. It was an enormous, beautiful and powerful bow and no one had been able to string it until now. All the princes and kings had tried in vain, for they had not even been able to lift it.

"This bow was given to my ancestors by Lord Shiva," explained King Janaka. "It has been with us ever since, and the prince who can pick it up and string it, shall marry my daughter Sita."



5

Sita

Princess Sita was a lovely maiden. Janaka was very proud of her. "I shall narrate the strange story of her birth," he said, clearing his throat. "For many years I had no children, you know. I prayed hard to the gods to bless me with a child. Then, one day, in a vision, the gods ordered me to go some distance out of the city and plough a field with my own hands. Of course, I obeyed. As I was pushing the plough, I heard the wails of an infant. I looked around. There was a little baby-girl lying in a furrow. How overjoyed I was! The gods had answered my prayers. They had given me a little princess! I gently carried her to my queen in the palace. Her happiness knew no bounds. We named our little princess Sita, because that means 'daughter of the earth' and she has grown up to be dutiful, kind, loving and beautiful as well. She is very dear to me and I desire a good husband for her." He paused, "Would Rama like to try and string the bow?" he asked.

As soon as the people of Mithila heard that Prince Rama, son of King Dasharatha of Ayodhya had come to Mithila, perhaps to marry the Princess they all came hurrying to the Palace. Ah, there he was, the handsome and radiant young prince! Would he win her, they wondered. King Janaka sat on his shining throne and Sita sat by his side. Vishawamitra sat in a place of honour and so did Lakshmana. Then King

Janaka ordered his courtiers to bring the huge bow in. Placed on a carriage, it looked magnificent. It was so heavy that it had to be wheeled in by hundreds of men. The people gazed at it in awe. Everyone had but one thought, would Prince Rama be successful?

Rama rose and walked towards the carriage. Then, as the courtiers and nobles watched breathlessly, he picked up the bow easily. Everybody let out a cry of surprise. Rama had actually picked it up! No other prince had been able to do so until now. Then he pulled the string. There was a loud reverberating sound and the mighty bow snapped into two! Everybody cried out with joy! The people rose all together and clapped. Prince Rama of Ayodhya had been successful. Now he would marry the beautiful Princess Sita.

"Let us send messages quickly to Ayodhya," said King Janaka. "We must ask King Dasharatha's permission for his son to marry Sita. And, of course, he and his queens must come to Mithila for the wedding."

King Dasharatha received the news of Rama's success with great joy and he ordered his courtiers to prepare for the journey to Mithila. As soon as all the preparations for the journey were completed, King Dasharatha left with his entourage—his relatives and courtiers, and arrived in Mithila. Here he was received by King Janaka with great honour. Mithila had been decorated and looked beautiful. People were singing and dancing and there were flowers everywhere.

When they had all assembled in the palace, Vishwamitra stood up. "O King Dasharatha," he said in his loud and clear voice, "King Janaka has one more daughter called Urmila. I think she will make a very good bride for Lakshmana. Will you agree to the marriage?"

King Dasharatha agreed. Then Vishwamitra added, "King Janaka's brother has two daughters also. Would you like to have Bharata and Shatrughna married to them?"

King Dasharatha agreed to this too. Great was the rejoicing in the palace that day and in the city of Mithila. The four princes were married to the four princesses amidst the chanting of sacred hymns.

Then King Dasharatha returned to Ayodhya in a procession, with the four princes and their brides. The people of Ayodhya who had been anticipating their arrival had decorated the city with flowers and bells. The people sang songs of joy and danced and rejoiced as the royal party returned from Mithila. King Dasharatha and his family were very happy.

King Kaikeya, Bharata's grandfather, invited Bharata to visit him. Bharata left with Shatrughna for the Kingdom of Kaikeya.

6

Kaikeyi

King Dasharatha was very happy and he had every reason to be so. He ruled over a fine kingdom, its citizens were law-abiding and loyal people. He had three lovely queens—Kaushalya (Rama's mother), Kaikeyi (Bharata's mother) and Sumitra (Lakshmana and Shatrughna's mother). He also had four strong, handsome and virtuous sons whose wives were beautiful and chaste.

"Ah!" he thought, "I must now have a celebration and proclaim Rama my *Yuvraj* or Crown Prince." When the people heard this, their joy knew no bounds. Dasharatha was a good king and they all loved him. Of course they knew that after King Dasharatha's death, Rama would be crowned king of Ayodhya.

Dasharatha summoned his ministers and apprised them of his plans. "Yes, of course your Majesty. Prince Rama should be Yuvraj," said one.

"Rama is the eldest prince," said another, "therefore, he is legally your Majesty's heir."

"Besides this, he is good, upright and just," put in a third.

"Yes your Majesty, Prince Rama will make an ideal king," said a fourth.

Dasharatha nodded. He knew that there was no one in the kingdom who could equal Prince Rama.

So the day was fixed when Prince Rama would be installed Yuvraj. Again, the people of Ayodhya prepared to celebrate this happy occasion. They swept the streets and cleaned all public buildings. They prepared to awaken early the next morning to hang rows of flowers everywhere. They even kept their lamps ready to be lighted.

In the Palace too, the servants were hurrying and scurrying about polishing, cleaning and dusting. Queen Kaushalya, in her apartments, was so happy that she almost wept with joy. Her son Rama was to be declared Yuvraj of Ayodhya the next day. She distributed alms, clothes and sweets to the poor. Queen Kaikeyi sat in her apartment. She had not yet heard the news. Suddenly her maid, the old hunch-backed Manthara ran in crying out, "O, my Queen! O, my Queen! Have you heard the news?"

"What news?" asked Kaikeyi.

"That Prince Rama, Queen Kaushalya's son, is to be appointed Yuvraj tomorrow."

"Oh, that is wonderful news, is it not?" asked Kaikeyi. "You have brought it, so you must be rewarded." She looked around. "Oh yes! Take this necklace. Good news like this deserves a good reward." She took off her gold necklace and gave it to Manthara.

"Good news!" cried Manthara wringing her hands. "You call this good news?"

"Yes. Of course," replied Queen Kaikeyi. "If Bharata is my son, so is Rama. I love them both dearly. Also, don't you think Prince Rama is the right person to rule Ayodhya, after my husband?"

"You may think so, but I don't! " cried Manthara throwing the gold necklace onto the floor. "I need no reward for this news. Hmph! You may love Bharata and Rama equally, but does Rama love you? Do you know what will happen if Rama becomes King?"

"What will happen if Prince Rama becomes King?" asked Queen Kaikeyi quite puzzled. "Nothing will happen. The kingdom will be well governed and everybody will be happy."

"You are living in a fool's paradise," said Manthara, coming close to her. "Don't you know power goes to everybody's head? When Rama becomes King, he will not treat Bharata well. He may even banish him from the kingdom."

"Prince Rama will do that? No, no I do not believe it!" cried Kaikeyi.

"Hmph, so you think!" cried Manthara. "What do you know of princes and kingdoms. You just wait and see what happens to Bharata."

"Oh no, no, no!" wept Kaikeyi. "Will he really banish him? Oh my poor Bharata!"

"Then why don't you ask the King to grant you your two boons?" said Manthara cunningly. "Don't you remember? You had once saved the King's life? And he had asked you to make two wishes? He had promised that he would grant whatever you asked for."

Kaikeyi sat up. Yes, she remembered the king had promised to grant her two wishes. If her Bharata was going to be banished, perhaps she had better ask for them now.

"Ask the King to make Bharata Crown Prince and to banish Rama to the forest. Yes, maybe for fourteen years. Then he will not be able to harm Bharata at all. Come, be sensible. Don't cry my Queen, but act carefully and cleverly," coaxed Manthara.

7

The Two Boons

Queen Kaikeyi wiped her tears and decided to do what Manthara had suggested. When King Dasharatha came to see her, she said she wanted something from him.

Dasharatha was so happy that without thinking he said, "Yes, my Queen, ask for whatever you want. I am so happy today, I shall grant your every wish."

Then Queen Kaikeyi reminded him of the time when she had saved his life and how he had promised to grant her two wishes. Now, she told him, she wanted them.

"Yes, of course!" said King Dasharatha. "Tell me what you want."

"I want Bharata declared Crown Prince and I want Rama banished to the forest for fourteen years," said Queen Kaikeyi slowly and clearly.

King Dasharatha was staggered. He could not believe his ears! His face became absolutely pale. Could Kaikeyi really be asking for such a thing? How could she? No, no, there must be some mistake.

He must not have heard her correctly. He asked her again what she wanted and still King Dasharatha could not believe it.

"No!" he cried. "No! No! You do not know what you are saying, Kaikeyi."

Queen Kaikeyi reiterated, "I know exactly what I am saying." She continued, "I want my son, Bharata to be made Yuvraj and Rama banished from Ayodhya for fourteen years. You made me a promise, remember, O King, and said I could ask for my two wishes whenever I wanted. I want them now."

King Dasharatha had tears in his eyes. "Please Kaikeyi," he begged, "do not ask for these two things. Not now. Ask for anything else and I shall be only too happy to grant them." She shook her head. Could she be so hard-hearted? "I do not know how long I shall live, please, Kaikeyi," he begged. "If Rama goes away for fourteen years I may never see him again."

Kaikeyi was adamant. These were the two things she wanted. Dasharatha turned away with a heavy heart. He could not sleep at all that night. He tossed and turned in his bed. Rama! Rama! Rama! He kept thinking only of his best-loved son, Prince Rama. It was then that he remembered the curse....

He had gone hunting one day and had heard the sound of an animal drinking water. "It must be a deer," he had thought to himself and holding his bow, had shot an arrow in the direction of the sound. It was only then that he heard a cry. The arrow had pierced a human being! Hurrying to the water's edge, he saw that it was a young man.

"Oh forgive me! Please forgive me," he had cried. "I thought it was a deer."

"Quick! Quick! Take me to my parents over there," the young man had said. "They are blind and I am their only comfort in this world."

Dasharatha had picked him up and taken him to the old couple. They had been heart-broken and angry and had wept bitterly. The old man had said to Dasharatha, "You have killed my son, Shravan. You have taken away my only hope in this world of darkness. I curse you. Yes, I curse you. May you die like me —— like me, weeping in anguish for the loss of your son...."

Dasharatha remembered everything now, as clearly as if it had happened only yesterday. How dreadful it seemed! He tossed and turned, sighed and wept all night; and morning found him wan and crying, "Rama! Oh my son, Rama, Rama, Rama."

The auspicious time was fast approaching and so the Chief Minister thought he had better go and see what was wrong. Why hadn't the King come to the large, decorated Throne Room? When he went to the Palace, he stood there shocked to see the King's face full of grief and sorrow.

"Your Majesty," he began, "is anything wrong?"

Queen Kaikeyi was there beside the King. "Send for Rama," she ordered. "The King wishes to speak to him."

The Chief Minister did not understand. What was all this? he wondered.

Prince Rama was sent for. He was surprised. Why had his father sent for him? He hurried to meet his father. The King could not speak. Tears rolled down his cheeks as father and son looked at each other.

"Have I done something wrong?" Prince Rama asked. "Is my father upset about anything?" he asked Kaikeyi.

"Your father had promised me two boons long ago and I have asked for them now," said Queen Kaikeyi.

Then she told Rama of the two boons. Contrary to her expectations, Rama did not get angry, nor did he cry out with disappointment. He bowed down and touched his father's feet.

"Whatever my father has promised shall be fulfilled," he said.

8

Lakshmana

When Queen Kaushalya heard what Kaikeyi had done, she could not believe her ears. She wept and wept. Queen Sumitra was very upset too. Lakshmana was horrified. Not only that, he was very angry. How dared Queen Kaikeyi ask for such boons? All the three queens loved the four princes like their own sons. Rama was also the eldest and the best. Did she not know the royal tradition of Ayodhya? The eldest prince always became the Crown Prince, and later succeeded his father.

"I shall kill anyone who dares to come between my brother, Rama and the throne," Lakshmana shouted angrily.

"Listen," he said to Rama, "if you go away, our father will die, and Ayodhya will no longer be a well-governed, happy and prosperous kingdom. Listen to me. For the sake of the kingdom, do not give in to the machinations of this wicked queen."

"No," replied Rama. "My mind is made up. I shall honour the promises made by our father. I shall go away to the forest and live like a hermit and come back only after the fourteen years are over. I have to go to the forest for fourteen years," Rama told his wife Sita.

She listened quietly. "I shall go with you," she said.

"Life will be very difficult in a forest," he explained. "You are used to the comforts of a palace."

"I would rather go with you than stay here," she replied. "A woman's duty is to be with her husband, and do you think, I shall enjoy living in the palace if you are not with me? I do not want even heaven without you there."

"Devi," he said gently, "my dearest wife, how can I be happy, if I make you unhappy. Come then, with me."

Lakshmana said he too would accompany Rama. "No, no, Lakshmana," said Rama gently. "You must stay and look after our father and our queen-mothers."

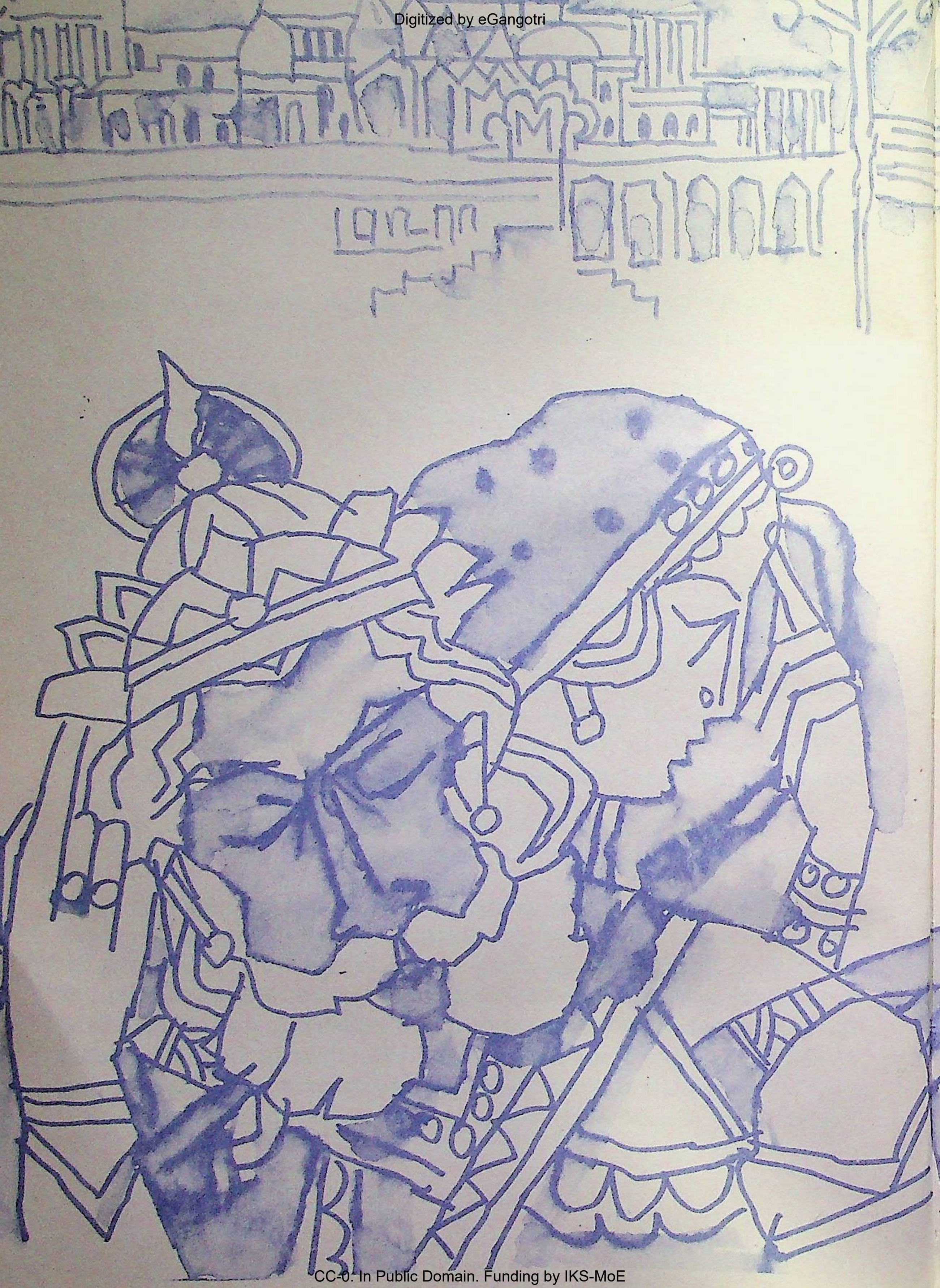
But Lakshmana would not listen to him. "Bharata can look after them. He loves them too. Please let me go with you." Finally, Rama relented.

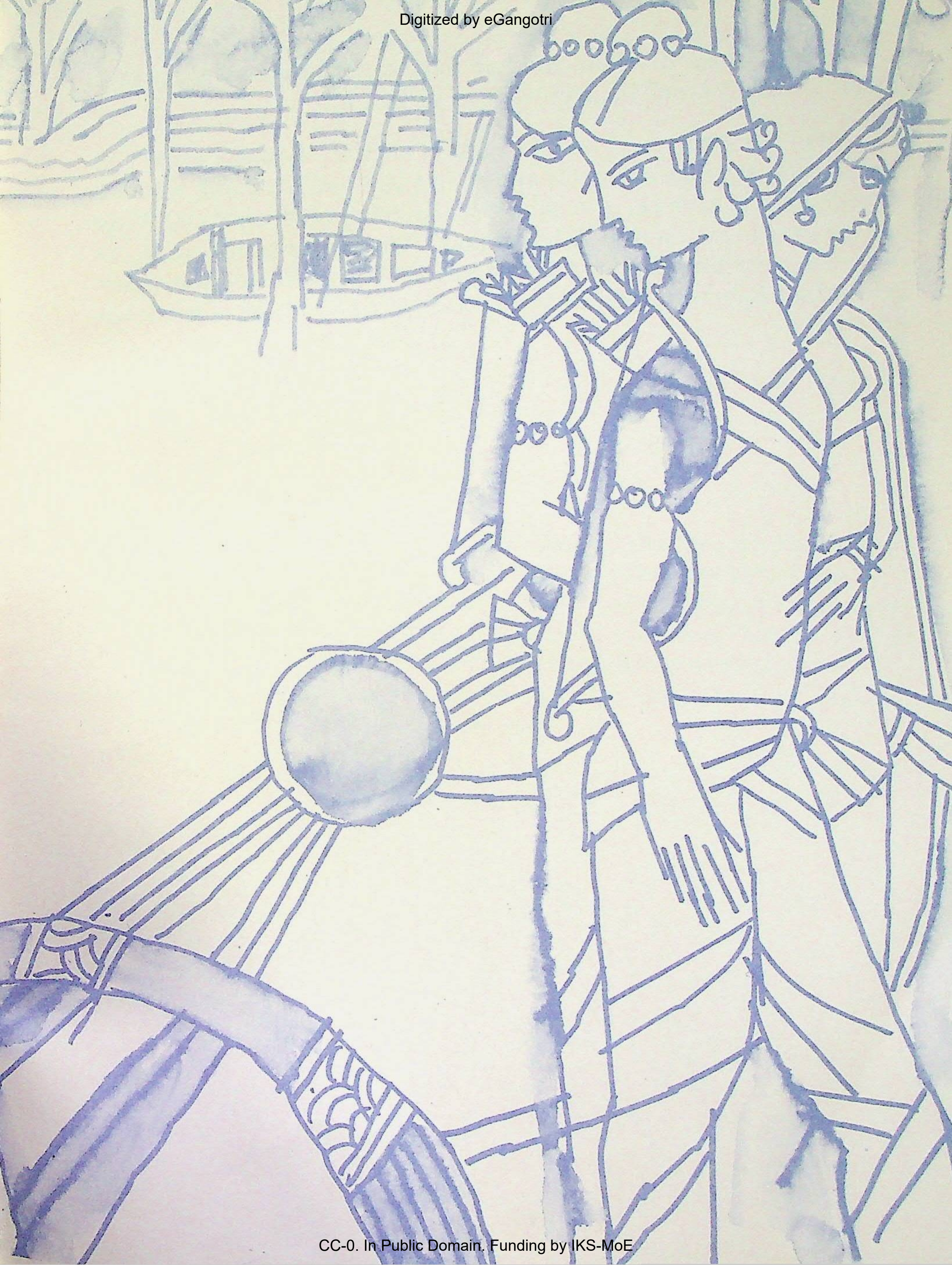
"Well done!" said Sumitra to her son, Lakshmana. "I am very glad that you are going too. Watch over your brother Rama and his wife and see that no harm comes to them."

"I shall walk in front of them with my bow in my hand," said Lakshmana. "I shall chop wood to build a hut, find fruits for them to eat and watch over them night and day, while they eat or sleep."

"Let us give away all our fine clothes and jewels," said Rama to Sita and Lakshmana.

All three took off their ornaments of gold and precious stones and changed into the ordinary robes of hermits. Then they went to take leave of the King and Queens, touching their feet respectfully and asking for their blessings. The Chief Minister, Sumantra, was to go with them as far as the outskirts of Ayodhya. As they climbed into the carriage, King Dasharatha, Queen Kausalya and Queen Sumitra, the Ministers, palace officials, servants and the people of Ayodhya stood by, silently weeping. As the carriage sped away, King Dasharatha's heart beat hard.





He fell down in a faint and had to be carried indoors to his bed. Queen Kaushalya and Kaikeyi went to sit by him.

"Do not touch me," he told Kaikeyi angrily. "I do not want you ever to come near me again. Go away! Go away, you scheming woman! How could she have been so cruel?" his grieving heart cried out. Why did she have to ask for the two boons now? Why did his poor Rama have to be banished like this for fourteen years? "Rama! Rama! Rama! My beloved son Rama, my beloved son Rama," he cried, as tears rolled down his cheeks.

9

Guha

After taking leave of his father, Rama's chariot travelled a long distance away from Ayodhya. Sumantra had driven fast and they reached the bank of the river Ganga. As night was approaching, they decided to rest there. This place belonged to a Nishada chieftain called Guha. His men informed him that Lord Rama had arrived, and so Guha hurried to welcome him. He ordered fruits for them to eat and mats to sleep on—but Rama refused them all.

"I thank you for all the trouble you have taken," he told Guha, "but since I have vowed that I shall live like a hermit, I really cannot accept these things."

Rama slept under a tree on the bare earth and Sita lay down beside him. Lakshmana did not rest. "I shall keep vigil over both of you," he said. How different was their place of rest and their beds that night! Rama had always lived in a palace, in comfort and luxury. Yet now, willingly, he lay down to sleep on the hard bare earth.

The next day, Rama sent Sumantra back to Ayodhya. "We shall now continue on our own. Go back and tell my father, the King, that we are doing well."

Sumantra was unhappy but he bid them goodbye and left, for he was unable to disobey Prince Rama.

Guha helped them cross the river. On the other bank was the hermitage of a sage called Bharadvaja. After Rama and Bharadvaja greeted each other, Rama explained that he wanted to go to a quiet place.

"We would like to live like hermits in peace and solitude," he said.

"Ah, then you must go to Chitrakoot," said Bharadvaja. "It is a beautiful and quiet place. There are other hermits there too. You will like it very much."

They left the sage and journeyed on. Soon they came to the bank of the river Jamuna. They made a raft from bamboo sticks that grew along the bank and crossed the river. They spent another night under the trees and reached Chitrakoot the next day. Chitrakoot was truly a beautiful place. Lakshmana set about chopping wood and collecting logs, and he built a little hut in which they could live.

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10

Bharata

Meanwhile, Ayodhya was plunged in grief. Gone were all the smiles and laughter of the people. The city which had appeared so joyous and beautiful a short while ago, now wore a grim and sorrowful look.

King Dasharatha lay in his chambers. Though he was well looked after, he grew weaker everyday. He could not eat; nor could he sleep. Each day seemed to drag on and on until it felt like a year. Then, one day, Sumantra the Chief Minister, came back. The King was waiting eagerly for him.

"What news have you brought of my dear son Rama?" Dasharatha asked him.

"Prince Rama is well, my lord!" Sumantra answered. "He has sent you his salutations and asked for your blessings."

Dasharatha's heart began to grieve again when he heard these words. He could only say Rama's name. Kaikeyi's cruel, selfish behaviour had broken his heart. After a few days, King Dasharatha died.... Ayodhya mourned the death of its king. Dasharatha had been kind and just. He had four sons, but not one was in Ayodhya to perform the last rites of the King and to light the funeral pyre.

Rama and Lakshmana were in the forest and Bharata and Shatrughna were in the kingdom of Kaikeya. Sumantra sent messengers quickly to call Bharata and Shatrughna back to Ayodhya.

"Tell the princes they are needed for some urgent work," said Sumantra. "Do not tell them about the death of their father."

Bharata and Shatrughna came back as soon as they possibly could. They found Ayodhya looking very different from the happy Ayodhya they had left behind. Why was everybody looking so sad, they wondered.

"The King is dead," they were told. Their father was dead? Oh, why had they not been here? they thought. Grieving, they hurried to the Palace.

"How did our father die? Where is my brother Rama?" Bharata asked his mother, Queen Kaikeyi.

"Rama has gone to the forest and you shall now be King!" she said.

Bharata was too shocked to answer. "I be King when Rama is there? How could you think of such a thing? No. I cannot ever, ever be King!" Then he wondered if his mother had anything to do with this. "Have you done this, Mother?" he asked. When Bharata was told about the boons, he wept. "Oh! Oh, you are a wicked, wicked woman," he cried. "I am ashamed to call you my mother. Why, tell me why, did you do this?"

"I wanted you to be King," she replied.

"I do not want to be King," he cried. "Rama, my dear, beloved brother Rama. He is the one who should be the ruler... and he has been banished. What must he be doing now in the forest? What difficulties must he be facing just now?"

Bharata called Sumantra and asked him to arrange for the funeral of the King. Then he told the people, "I intend going to the forest to bring back my brother, Rama. Only Rama can be King of Ayodhya."

The people were very glad to hear this. Bharata was a good man, they thought. He was upholding dharma.

While Rama, Sita and Lakshmana were journeying to Chitrakoot, Bharata was preparing to go in search of them. A great number of people from Ayodhya accompanied him. They travelled in chariots, on horseback, in bullock-carts and some even walked. Guha was surprised to see them approaching his territory.

"I wonder why they are coming?" he asked himself. "Is Bharata going to try and kill Rama? If he is, then I shall kill Bharata myself, first."

However, when Guha met Bharata, he was relieved to find that Bharata, far from wanting to kill Rama, was only trying to make him come back to Ayodhya to become King.

"Where is Rama? I cannot rest until I find him," he told Guha. Then Guha told him how Rama had crossed the river and helped Bharata to cross it too. Bharata met the sage Bhardvaja also, who told him that Rama had gone to Chitrakoot.

11

Chitrakoot

Lakshmana saw all the dust that had stirred up and heard the noise of the approaching crowd. It sounded almost as if there was a whole army! Fearing an attack, he climbed up a tree to be certain. Yes, there were the chariots with the flag of Ayodhya.

"Bharata? Has Bharata come here? Why? Does he want to harm Rama? I must attack him before he attacks us." He quickly climbed down and told Rama. "I saw the flag of Ayodhya," he cried. "Do you think Bharata has come to kill us?"

"Bharata can never think of harming us," said Rama. "I am quite sure of that. He loves us, don't you know?"

Soon Bharata, Shatrughna and the others, reached the hut. Bharata saw Rama and running up to him, he embraced him.

"Oh my dear, beloved brother!" he cried. "Why did you leave us? Why did I have to be away from Ayodhya when all this happened? Forgive us and return with us now to Ayodhya."

"I cannot come," explained Rama. "I vowed to fulfill our father's promise. How is he?"

Bharata could hardly speak. "He is no more," he said.

Rama was shocked. "Oh my father!" he cried. "My beloved father! How did it happen? "

Bharata and Shatrughna told him how Rama's absence had broken Dasharatha's heart. Rama and Lakshmana both wept for the King. He had been a good, just and kind man.

Then Bharata told Rama how the people were waiting for him. "Come back with us and assume your rightful position. Be King of Ayodhya. Please, my dear, beloved brother Rama, do not disappoint us."

But Rama would not go. He had to spend fourteen years in exile, he explained. It was his duty to fulfill his father's promise.

"Did you really think I would go back with you?" he asked. "We are Kshatriyas. It is our duty to uphold dharma."

When Bharata found Rama would not agree to return, he travelled back with a very heavy heart. Before leaving he embraced Rama with tears in his eyes, and bent to touch Rama's feet.

"Let me take back your sandals," he said, and took them off Rama's feet.

"Look after our Queen Mothers," Rama told Bharata and Shatrughna. "Do not be angry with mother Kaikeyi."

Bharata and Shatrughna returned to Ayodhya with all the people who had accompanied them. The citizens who had remained behind were waiting eagerly for their prince and were disappointed when they found he had not come. Bharata wept as he told them about his meeting with Rama. Then he took Rama's sandals and placed them on the throne.

"If Rama is not here, his sandals will be kept in his place and I shall look after Ayodhya as his regent. I shall live outside Ayodhya in Nandigrama and I shall live like a hermit for fourteen years until my beloved brother Rama comes back," declared Bharata.

12

Panchavati

After Bharata left, Rama felt that, he could not settle down in Chitrakoot. Everything reminded him of Bharata all the time.

"Let us go south," he said.

So, Sita, Lakshmana and Rama travelled south. They left their hut, amidst its beautiful and peaceful surroundings and walked until they came to a place called Dandaka. This was a lovely place too, full of trees, birds and flowers. Many hermits lived here. They told Rama that several demons came and disturbed them every day. Rama thought he would stay and kill the demons. If he did so, the hermits would be able to live without fear.

Rama and Lakshmana decided to watch and wait. As soon as the hermits sat down to pray and perform their rituals, the demons appeared. The two brothers slew the demons and the hermits were very grateful. For ten years, Rama, Lakshmana and Sita lived like this, going from place to place, until at last, they came to a place called Panchavati in South India.

Panchavati was an extremely pretty place. It lay on the banks of the river Godavari. There were plenty of trees, flowers and fruits. The birds sang all day and the gentle breeze made the air cool and delightful. They decided to spend some time here. Lakshmana built another hut. They lived here contentedly for some time. Close by, lived an ancient bird called Jatayu. Often, when Rama and Lakshmana went hunting, Jatayu would sit by Sita and guard her.

13

Surpanakha

One day, a young woman saw Rama and came upto him. She was Surpanakha, a she-demon and the sister of King Ravana of Lanka.

"Why don't you marry me?" she asked. "You are such a handsome man, you deserve a very beautiful wife. What is your wife Sita compared to me? Look at me."

Rama did not talk to her, nor did he encourage her. She grew angry. She tried to persuade Lakshmana to marry her, but he did not want to marry her either. By now Surpanakha was really furious. She hurled abuses at them and threatened to eat Sita up. As she was entering the hut, Rama called out to Lakshmana to protect Sita. Lakshmana picked up his bow and shot an arrow that cut off her nose. Screaming loudly with pain and anger, Surpanakha ran away. She had two other brothers, Khara and Dushana and she called them. They came threatening to kill the two princes but Rama and Lakshmana killed them swiftly with their bow and arrow. Surpanakha wept loudly. The defeat and death of her brothers and her own humiliation was more than she could bear. So she went to Ravana, her brother in the kingdom of Lanka.

Ravana was sitting on his golden throne, resplendent with jewels, which were glittering in the light of thousands of candles that burned in his court room.

"You must avenge my humiliation, you must!" she screamed.

Ravana was shocked by her appearance. What had happened to his sister?

"The two princes of Ayodhya, Rama and Lakshmana, who are living in exile, have done this to me. They have ill-treated and humiliated your sister and also killed your brothers Khara and Dushana."

Ravana sat up angrily. Had the princes of Ayodhya dared to do this? He shook with anger. He would teach those wandering princes a lesson. No one can defy me, he thought.

"You must kill them," howled Surpanakha. Then she went close to Ravana and said cunningly, "This Prince Rama also has a beautiful wife. She would make you a good queen."

Ravana's eyes shone. "Yes," he thought. "I shall fight with them and slay them. I shall avenge the death of my brothers and Surpanakha's humiliation and force Rama's beautiful wife to marry me."

14

The Golden Deer

Ravana sat alone in his palace. As he thought about the incident, he become angrier still.

"They humiliated my sister, Ravana's sister!" he thundered. "Were they not afraid I would avenge her? Did they not think I would punish them? I have another plan. I shall not fight with Rama. No. I shall carry away his wife. That will cause him more pain and anguish, and he will repent that he ever behaved as he did with my sister." Then he thought about how Khara and Dushana had been killed. "Yes," he said to himself, his eyes narrowing slyly, "I shall trick Sita into coming away with me."

He got into his carriage and flew over land and sea, over the mountains until he came to where Maricha, the magician lived. Maricha was a very clever magician. He could change himself into anything— an animal, bird or even a tree.

"Maricha," Ravana said, "I want you to do something for me. Rama and Lakshmana, the two princes of Ayodhya, have insulted my sister and killed my brothers, Khara and Dushana. Now I want to kidnap Sita and so I want you to change yourself into a golden deer and run in front of their hut. Let Rama follow you. Lead him away, far away into the forest and then I shall do the rest."

"But Rama will kill me," said the frightened Maricha.

"Then, when you are dying, you must imitate Rama's voice. Call out 'Lakshmana! Lakshmana!' and Lakshmana, thinking it is really Rama calling him, will go after him."

Ravana thought it was an excellent plan and laughed happily to himself. Poor Maricha did not dare disobey. He turned himself into a beautiful golden deer and came and stood before the hut in Panchavati. Then he hopped and jumped about to attract attention. Sita saw the shining golden deer. She could not believe her eyes.

"Can you not get me that golden deer?" she asked Rama. "It is so beautiful."

"Wait!" cried Lakshmana. "I have never seen a golden deer before. Have you? I think this must be a demon and I am sure this is some trick."

"I do not think so," said Rama, "and since Sita wants the deer, I shall chase it. You stay here with her. Do not leave her alone."

The deer was indeed pretty and it jumped daintily, here and there, just out of Rama's reach. Then it suddenly turned and darted swiftly out of sight. Rama ran after it. Faster! faster! faster, until he discovered he had come a long way. He also realised that he would never be able to capture the deer alive. Holding his bow, he shot an arrow, but before the arrow pierced it, the deer changed into Maricha again. Rama remembered Lakshmana's words. "This looks like a trick," he had said.

Maricha was dying. He imitated Rama's voice and cried, "Oh, Lakshmana! Oh Sita! Oh Lakshmana! Help!"

Sita heard Maricha's voice and thought it to be Rama's. "Lakshmana, go quickly to your brother. He needs your help," she cried.

Lakshmana, however, was not fooled. "That doesn't sound like Rama," he said to Sita. "He would not call out like that. Besides, he has instructed me not to leave you alone."

Lakshmana's reply made Sita very angry. "Go," she ordered. "Why don't you want to go and help him? What is the use of my being safe when he is in danger? Go at once or I shall kill myself."

Meanwhile Rama, far away from the hut, saw Maricha dying in a pool of blood. So it was this demon, who was trying to imitate him and calling out "Lakshmana! Lakshmana! Help! Help!" His thoughts flew to Sita and Lakshmana. He knew they must be wondering what had happened, so he tried to make his way back to the hut, as quickly as he could.

15

Ravana

Meanwhile, poor Lakshmana was very confused. He had never disobeyed his brother. But now Sita was commanding him to go. What was he to do? Finally he took a stick and drew a circle around the spot where Sita stood.

"Do not go beyond this line," he said. "As long as you stay inside this circle you will be quite safe."

Then, sadly, he went to look for Rama. The cunning Ravana was hiding behind a tree. He had heard and seen all this. As soon as Lakshmana was out of sight, he changed himself into an old *sanyasi*. Sanyasis were religious men who wandered from place to place and had no possessions. Most people gave them food. Sita always did.

When she saw the sanyasi standing and calling out in front of the hut she said, "Come holy man. You must be tired and hungry. Have something to eat."

Ravana tried to come near the door of the hut but as soon as he tried to put his foot inside the circle drawn by Lakshmana, a fire sprang up along the line. He shrank back in fear.

"I cannot come any nearer," he said. "Why don't you come out and give it to me?"

Lakshmana had asked Sita not to step out of the circle. "I cannot," she said. "Why don't you come here?"

Ravana tried again, but as soon as his foot touched the line, the fire sprang up again and he had to go back.

"You poor man," said Sita. "Lakshmana has drawn that line for my safety and warned me not to go beyond it; but what harm can there be in my coming out for a few seconds to give *bhiksha* to a sanyasi?" And saying this, she stepped onto the line and beyond it. Ravana had been waiting for this. Like a tiger springing on its prey, he seized her and pulled her towards him.

"Let me go! Let me go!" Sita cried out. "Who are you? I thought you were a poor sanyasi. Are you not a sanyasi? Who are you?"

Ravana laughed loudly. "I am Ravana," he said. "Ravana, the King of Lanka and I am taking you away to my kingdom! Have you never heard of me? I have wealth and jewels and everything a woman could wish for. Be my queen and you will have three thousand servants to serve you."

"I am the wife of Prince Rama of Ayodhya," she cried. "Don't you know he will kill you for this?" But Ravana only laughed and pulled her into his waiting chariot, Pushpaka.

Sita struggled, but Ravana was too strong for her. She begged, "Please let me go. Please. Why are you doing this to me? I thought you were a sanyasi. I only wanted to help you. Rama! Rama! Lakshmana!"

Neither Rama nor Lakshmana could hear her cries and Ravana, afraid that the two princes would come back and see him, made his chariot fly up into the air. He began his journey towards Lanka.

16

Jatayu

Jatayu, the big bird which usually protected Sita, was asleep. He awoke suddenly, hearing Ravana's chariot speeding away with Sita.

"Jatayu, dear Jatayu help me!" cried Sita.

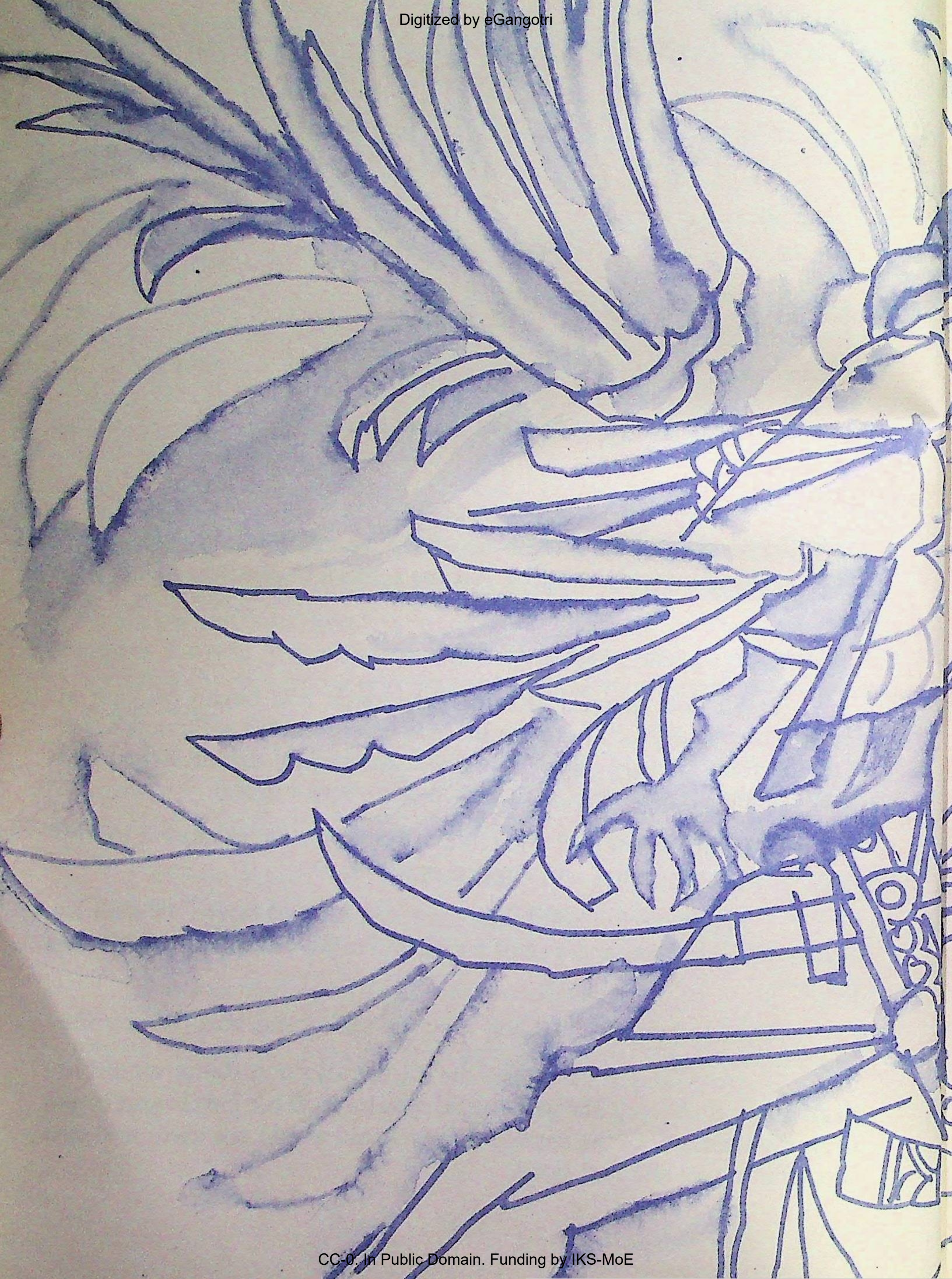
Jatayu flew at once towards the chariot and began pecking at Ravana but he was far too strong for him. Jatayu clawed at Ravana's face and the reins he held in his hands. Ravana picked up his sword and chopped off Jatayu's wings. The great bird began to fall.

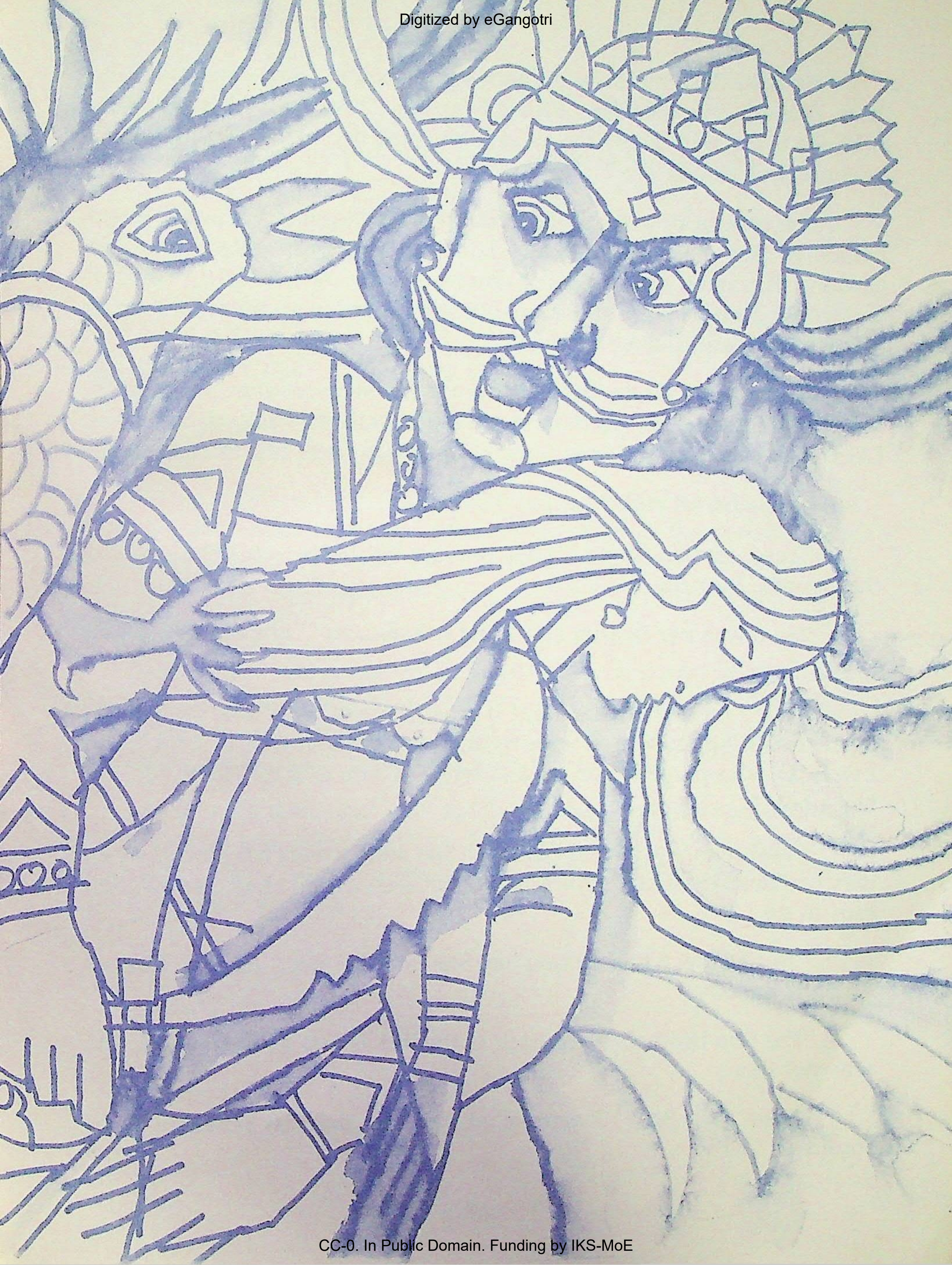
"Jatayu, Oh Jatayu!" cried Sita. "You have been wounded for my sake. Oh! Jatayu, what will happen now?"

"I shall try to live until I see Lord Rama," said Jatayu. "I shall try not to die until then and I shall tell him that Ravana has carried away his wife."

"Poor Jatayu, dear Jatayu, may the gods bless you," wept Sita.

Oh poor Jatayu! He would die for her sake and Rama would not even know. Suddenly, she had an idea. She took off her jewels and began to throw them out of the chariot. Surely Rama would see them and find out which way she had gone.





As they flew over a mountain top, Sita saw some *vanaras* sitting there. She cried out loudly, "Please hear me. This wicked King Ravana of Lanka is forcibly taking me away. Please tell my husband, Lord Rama to come and rescue me."

The chariot flew speedily through the air. At last Ravana reached Lanka. It was a very beautifully laid out city, with wide roads and gardens. Ravana's palace was magnificent but Sita refused to enter it. She wept bitterly. Finally, Ravana left her in a garden guarded by several of his strong and fierce *rakshasis*.

Meanwhile, Rama tried to retrace his steps to the hut quickly. Leaving Maricha dying in the forest, he was walking back when he saw Lakshmana coming towards him. Both the brothers ran to each other.

"Are you all right?" asked Lakshmana.

"Yes," replied Rama. "That was not my voice you heard. It was the demon, Maricha."

"So it was a trick after all!" cried Lakshmana "I knew it. I told you so."

"Yes," replied Rama, "and it was Maricha who was the golden deer. He is dying now. You were right, Lakshmana. It was all a trick, but I wonder who played it on us and why? Where is Sita? Have you left her alone?"

Lakshmana explained how both Sita and he were frightened when they had heard Maricha's voice calling out and how Sita had commanded him to go.

"But I drew a line around her. She must be safe," he said. "Let us go back quickly."

The two brothers went back to the hut as fast as they could. Sita was not there.

"Sita! Sita! Sita!" Rama called out, but she was nowhere to be found.

Where was Sita? The brothers began to fear for Sita's security. Nearby, they noticed Jatayu lying, almost dead. Rama ran to him.

"Jatayu," he said tenderly. "What happened to you?"

"I - I - Ravana...." gasped Jatayu.

"Yes, Yes?"

"Ravana carried away Sita in his chariot.... I tried to stop him, he cut off my wings — he has taken her away to Lanka.... She begged you to go and rescue her," saying this, Jatayu died.

"Oh! Jatayu, you wonderful, faithful bird. Oh Jatayu, Jatayu!" cried Rama and his heart bled for the loyal and friendly bird.

After completing the last rites of Jatayu, Rama and Lakshmana continued their search for Sita. While wandering in the forest, Rama killed Kabandha, a rakshasa, thus liberating him from a curse. Before dying, Kabandha suggested that they seek the help of the Vanara king, Sugriva, to find Sita.

Moving on, they came to an ashram on the banks of the River Pampa. It was the abode of a low-caste ascetic named Shabari. She touched Rama's feet and said, "O Lord, today my tapasya is complete. Please taste some fruits that I have gathered for you."

Rama and Lakshmana were touched by her devotion and ate with relish whatever was offered to them. They were moved by the depth and purity of her love.... As they prepared to leave, Shabari too, told them to go to Sugriva for help.

17

Looking for Sita

Rama and Lakshmana walked on through the forest looking for Sita. After some time they reached the Vanara or monkey territory. Some vanaras who were sitting on a hillock saw them and went to report their arrival to their king, Sugriva.

"I wonder if my brother Vali has sent them to spy on us?" said Sugriva. "Go and find out who they are," he told his minister, Hanuman.

"I do not think they are spies," replied Hanuman. "They are very handsome men in hermit's clothes, but they look like princes. They are carrying bows in their hands. I shall go and find out."

So he hopped upto them. "Who are you?" asked Hanuman.

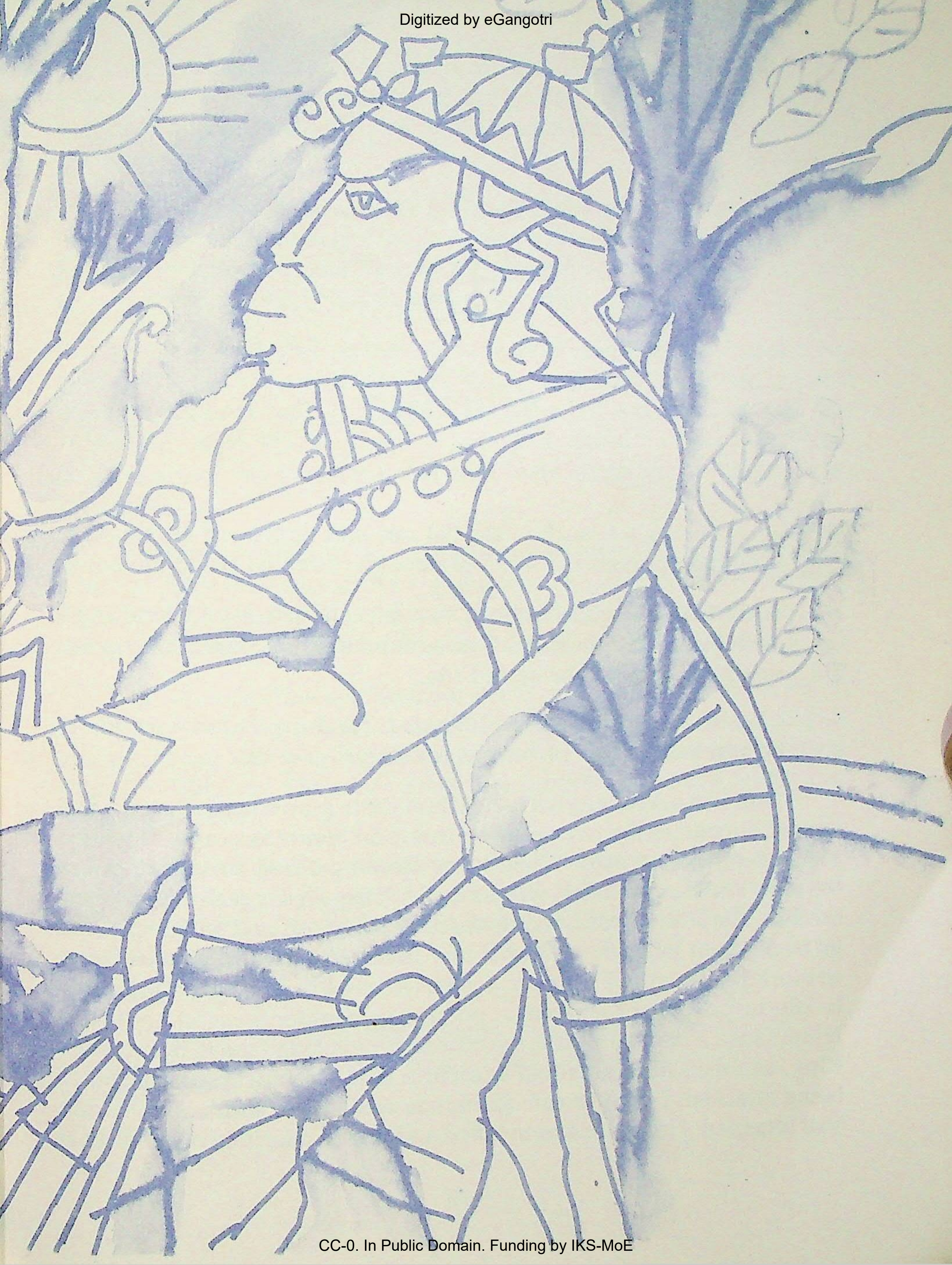
"I am Rama, the exiled prince of Ayodhya and this is my brother, Lakshmana. I am looking for my wife, Sita and am afraid some ill has befallen her," replied Rama.

"I am Hanuman," said the vanara, "the minister of Sugriva, king of the varanas. I am the son of Vayu the wind-god, and can assume any form I like. I can jump, leap or fly through the air as I please. Come with me."

Hanuman led them to his king, Sugriva. "Welcome to our mountain retreat," said Sugriva. "This is all I have. My kingdom, palace and my wife have been taken away by my brother, Vali. Help me to win them back, O Lord Rama, and then with the help of my vanara army, I shall help you win back your queen, Sita. Are these not her jewels? She threw them down crying out for help, when Ravana was taking her away."

Surgriva showed Rama the ornaments that Sita had thrown from the chariot. Rama recognised them, but Lakshmana did not. "I only recognise her anklets," he said to Sugriva. "I respect Sita so much that I have never looked up at her. I only looked at her feet."

"Yes," said Rama, "these ornaments are Sita's, my dear beloved wife." With tears in his eyes he continued, "If Ravana has carried her away, we shall have to defeat him and bring her back, no matter how dangerous or difficult it will be. I know that he shall have to be destroyed and his family and Kingdom too. But, first let me help you, Sugriva. Tell me all that happened between you and your brother, Vali."



18

Sugriva

Sugriva broke a branch of the Sal tree and Rama and he sat on it. Hanuman offered Lakshmana a bough of sandal wood blossoms.

After that Hanuman rubbed two sticks together and kindling a fire, worshipped it by placing flowers around it. Then Rama and Sugriva did *pradakshina* around the sacred fire.

"We are now friends," said Sugriva, "and in joy and sorrow, we shall be together." Then he related his story.

Vali had asked Sugriva to help him destroy an enemy. Sugriva had waited outside as the two wrestled inside an enormous cave. "I waited a very long time outside. Then I saw foaming blood streaming out of the cave and heard terrible war-like cries. They were not the cries of my brother. Naturally, I assumed my brother was dead and so I decided to go back to our kingdom of Kishkinda. Then, thinking it would be better to block the mouth of the cave, for fear of my brother's enemy coming to kill the people of Kishkinda, I put a huge boulder there and returned home sadly. After some time, the ministers persuaded me to be crowned King, as they said a kingdom without a king was always in danger of being attacked. I tried to rule Kishkinda well. Then, suddenly one day, Vali returned. He had not been killed and was in a terrible rage. He beat me, called me names and hounded me out of the kingdom. I live here in fear of him, for he is very strong and powerful. Help me get back my kingdom and my wife, O Lord Rama. I tremble when I think of him. I am mortally afraid."

"Yes," replied Rama after he heard everything, "I have sworn to be your friend and to help you. So do not worry, I shall kill your brother and see that you become king in his place. But you must do as I say. I want you to go and challenge him to a fight tomorrow."

So the next day, trembling with fear, Sugriva went and stood before Vali's palace and challenged him to come out. "Who are you that dares to challenge me?" roared Vali. He came out and saw Sugriva. "Ha! it is you, Sugriva!" he cried. "Have you dared to come here and challenge me? Do you not know that I can crush you to death in an instant?"

Vali rushed out and the two brothers wrestled. Rama stood behind a tree with his bow and arrow, waiting for a chance to kill Vali. But both the brothers looked so alike, that Rama could hardly make out one from the other. Supposing he shot Sugriva instead of Vali, what then?

Meanwhile, the two brothers continued wrestling. Vali tried to crush Sugriva in his powerful arms. Poor Sugriva tried to kick and pull and push, but Vali was far too strong for him and almost crushed him to death. Why did Rama not shoot him quickly, wondered Sugriva in his terrible pain.

Rama had said he was his friend, but he was not doing anything to help, and here was Sugriva, almost dead. In the end, Sugriva begged Vali to let him go. He was very sad, angry and hurt that Rama had not kept his word and helped him. He felt ashamed and wept at being disgraced. He blamed Rama for it.

"I could not shoot Vali," Rama explained, "because you two brothers look so alike. What could I do? I might have shot you by mistake."

The next day, Ram told Sugriva to challenge Vali again. He took the garland of flowers that Lakshmana wore, and put it round Sugriva's neck. Then he said, "Go now." Sugriva went and challenged Vali again.

"Ha! What! You are here again!" thundered Vali, as he came rushing out. "I see you want to die. I shall not spare you this time."

Poor Sugriva, he shook like a leaf with fear, as Vali came tearing at him like a thunderstorm. The two brothers wrestled. Trees were uprooted, the hills shook, clouds of dust rose up to the sky and all the animals ran helter-skelter in fear and trepidation. Poor Sugriva, he was nearly crushed to pieces in Vali's powerful arms. Rama was watching and he could make out clearly who Sugriva was, because of the garland of flowers round his neck. Rama picked up his bow and, with one arrow, shot Vali. He fell down dead.

Sugriva, Hanuman and Sugriva's vanara followers, all rejoiced. Then, Vali was duly cremated and Sugriva crowned King of Kishkinda.* Vali's son Angad and Sugriva invited Rama to stay in the palace with them.

"I cannot stay in a city," replied Rama, "since I have sworn that I shall live in the forest for 14 years, but I thank you. Now we must go and find Sita."

Sugriva advised Rama to wait. "The rainy season is just starting and it will be very difficult to do anything. Let us wait until the monsoons are over. Then we shall start our search."

Rama was very sad, but he listened to Sugriva's advice and waited until the rains had come and gone. He waited for many days. Finally he sent Lakshmana to Sugriva.

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*According to one version, Queen Tara, Vali's wife was very unhappy. "You have made me sad," weeping, she told Rama. "I shall curse you. You, too, will be as sad as I am now. You will find your wife Sita but will lose her again."

19

Hanuman

Sugriva ordered Hanuman to summon all the vanaras of the land. "Go, tell them they all must be here within ten days or I shall be very angry."

Every vanara who heard the command, arrived in Sugriva's capital. From all over, they came, until the city seemed to be overflowing.

Sugriva spoke to them, "I want you all to go east, west, north and south, and find out where Sita is. Do not come back without any news or I shall be very angry indeed and I shall punish you." Hanuman and Angad were both among the group that went south.

Rama called Hanuman and gave him a ring with his name inscribed on it. "When you find Sita, show her this ring. She will recognise you as my messenger," he said.

The vanaras leaped and disappeared over the mountains, across the valleys, climbing trees and hopping over the plains. They went in all directions. They looked everywhere for Sita, but after one month, some returned to Sugriva and told him that they had not been able to find her.

Hanuman and Angad were both very upset. "I cannot go back," said Angad. "My uncle Sugriva will kill me. I shall sit here on this mountain and fast until I die." The other monkeys decided to do the same.

On a neighbouring mountain sat an old vulture-king. His name was Sampaati and he had lost his wings. From his place, he saw them and thought to himself, "Good! If so many monkeys die here, I shall be able to feed on them, without having to go far."

Hanuman was grumbling. "Because of Kaikeyi, Lord Rama had to go to the forest and because they went to the forest, Ravana carried away Sita and poor Jatayu lost his life. Now we shall all lose our lives like Jatayu."

"Who is talking about Jatayu?" asked Sampaati. "Jatayu is my brother."

Hanuman told Sampaati all that had happened, how Jatayu had died and how they were looking for Sita.

"Oh my brother Jatayu!" lamented Sampaati. "Do you know, once we were both flying, trying to see who could go higher. As we soared, the heat of the sun became unbearable. I spread my wings, to shield my brother and so my wings were burnt. Since then I am unable to fly and just sit here and hope I get enough to eat... but tell me, is Jatayu really dead? However, do not lose heart. I can help you. I can see Sita for I still have very sharp and powerful eyes. I can see her in the kingdom of Lanka surrounded by rakshasis." The heart of the vanaras sank when they heard this.

They were afraid of the big expanse of sea lying between them and Lanka, but Hanuman who had been blessed with magical powers said, "I shall go to Lanka."

"Hanuman is the only one who can go to Lanka," said Angad after some thought.

"Yes, Hanuman is exceptional. Only he can go and return with some news," added Jambavan.

"You see," explained Hanuman to all the vanaras who were listening carefully. "One day, the sage Bharadvaj was chased by a mad elephant. My father killed the elephant and saved Bharadvaj. So he blessed my father and said, "You will have a son who will have magical powers and who will be successful and victorious in his duties." I am that son and I have magical powers. Now I can use them for our good. Wait for me. I shall come back soon. I shall fly through the air to Lanka as swiftly as I can."

Hanuman prayed to Rama and the other gods to bless him and give him power and strength to fulfill the great task that he had undertaken.

He grew bigger and taller until he was so tall that he could jump and leap over huge distances. All the others looked at him with awe. "Now I shall go to Lanka. *Jai Shree Ram*!" he cried, and leapt up into the air, flying over trees and lakes, and over hillocks and mountains.

The gods watched him, but felt they should test him a little and see if he was capable of accomplishing the great task ahead of him. They sent Surasa, the mother of snakes, to try and obstruct him on his journey.

She appeared before him, large and frightening and stopped him in mid-air.

"Who are you?" asked Hanuman. "Please do not stop me. I am on an important mission for Lord Rama. I am going to Lanka to find out where Sita is. If you want to eat me, you may do so when I come back but let me go now, please. I am in a great hurry."

"I must devour you today," she cried. "You must enter my mouth. I have been granted a boon. No one who defies me and does not enter my mouth, lives."

Hanuman was perplexed at first. Then he had an idea. "You will have to open you mouth very wide," he said and started growing bigger; but he noticed that the larger he grew, the wider her mouth opened. When he saw that her mouth had opened really wide, he quickly made himself very tiny, jumped into it and jumped out again, before she could close it.

"Well done!" said Surasa. "I had been sent to test you. Good luck to you. Go and fulfill your mission."

Hanuman sped away happily towards Lanka. Beneath him he saw the brown and green of the mountains and forests give way to the dazzling blue of the ocean.

He was flying through the air swiftly, when suddenly he felt as if he was a ship that was being pushed back by a contrary wind or as if he was being pushed down. He looked and saw a she-demon pulling him down by his shadow. "Come, come," she cried. "I can no longer bear this hunger. I must eat you now."

Hanuman guessed this must be another of the tests imposed upon him by the gods. He would not be able to escape, so again he made himself small, entered the she-demon's mouth, tore open her entrails and escaped. The demon sank to the bottom of the ocean and died.

20

The Ashoka Grove

Hanuman flew on and landed on a mountain close to Lanka. From here he surveyed the kingdom. It appeared lovely indeed. There were forests and fruit trees and palaces and gardens. An extremely high wall surrounded the city.

"How will Lord Rama ever conquer this city?" he wondered. "The walls are so thick and appear impregnable. The whole city looks indestructible. But never mind, let me at least have a look. How shall I go in? These rakshasas who are guarding the gates are so fierce that I fear I shall never be able to get past them."

He made himself shrink in size. He kept getting smaller until he was the size of a small cat. Poor Hanuman, he was assailed by many doubts. Would Lord Rama's army be able to march as far south as Lanka? Would the vanaras be able to cross the waters? Would they be able to scale the terribly high walls of Lanka? Where was Sita? Was she alive?... That was the most important question.

He thought, "First of all I must find out about Sita's whereabouts and her welfare. If she has spurned Ravana, he has probably killed her." Hanuman sighed. "Maybe I had better wait until nightfall," he thought, "and then slip into the city unobserved."

When it became dark, Hanuman quietly started walking along the ramparts, gazing down at the city. What a beautiful place. What superb roads! What glittering lights! Suddenly, an ugly creature barred his way.

"Who are you? Why are you here? Speak the truth!" it commanded.

"I am looking at your enchanting city," replied Hanuman. "When I have finished, I shall go away."

The rakshasi, who was the guardian-goddess of the city, struck Hanuman with her claw-like hand. Hanuman, surprised, struck back. The rakshasi doubled up with pain. "The glorious days of this city are over," she thought as she remembered the prophecy, "When the city-goddess is hit by a monkey, the city will be doomed...." She stood aside to let Hanuman enter.

However, Hanuman did not enter through the gates. According to *dharma*, it was wrong for an enemy to enter through the gate. So he jumped over the wall and walked along the streets. What a splendid palace was Ravana's! And, in the inner palace, on an exquisitely beautiful couch sat Ravana resplendent in a magnificent robe and shining jewels. His queens lay on couches, some were fast asleep. What beauty! What clothes, what jewellery, thought Hanuman as he gazed at them.

Suddenly he stopped. "I am sinning," he said. "I am gazing at another man's wives. This is improper." Then again he thought, "If I do not look at the women how shall I find Sita? She must be with the women. She cannot be with the men. No, he thought, she will not be here with Ravana or his queens. She must be locked up far away. Is Sampaati wrong, he wondered. Is Sita dead? If not, then, where is Sita?

He wandered out onto the streets again and walked along until he came to a garden called the Ashoka Grove. Suddenly, he saw a lady sitting there. She looked beautiful but very sad. Her eyes were red from weeping and she kept chanting "Rama, Rama, Rama." She was guarded by several rakshasis. This must be Sita, he thought and was about to speak to her when he saw Ravana coming to the garden. He quickly hid in the trees.

Ravana came up to Sita and said, "I am asking you again to be my wife. You will be able to enjoy all the things a queen of Lanka can have. You are a foolish woman. Why do you not consent?" He came near her, but as soon he did, Sita took a blade of grass and threw it between her and Ravana. The blade seemed to catch fire and Ravana could not come nearer.

"How dare you talk to me like this? Go away. Go away, you wicked king," she cried. "Very soon, my husband, Rama, will come to rescue me. He will wage war on Lanka. You will die. So repent and let me go!"

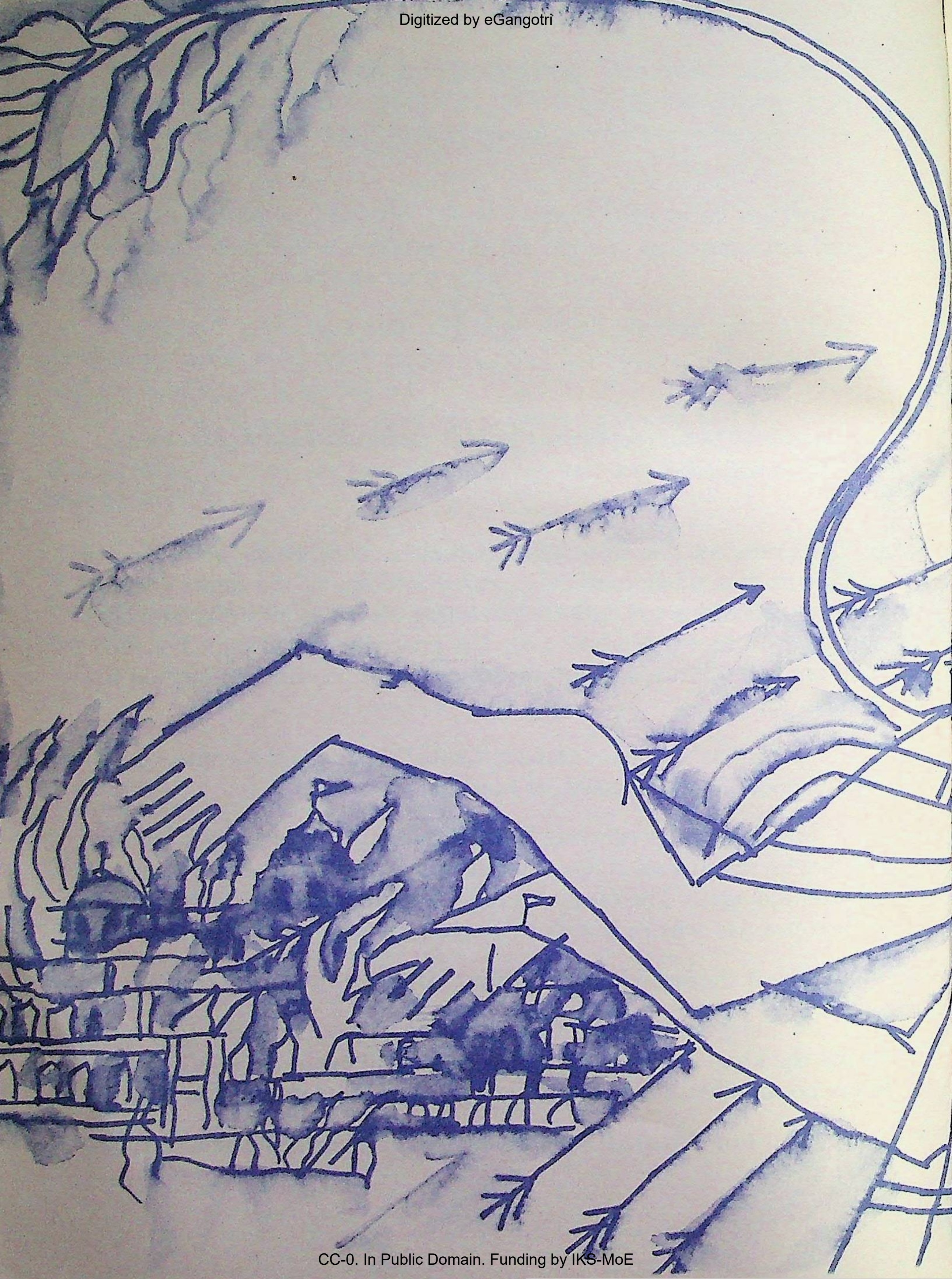
"No!" thundered Ravana. "How will Rama ever come here? Do you think he will find you? His army can never reach here, that is, if he has an army. He is like a wandering hermit in a forest. Humph! I shall give you one year to think and change your mind. You are a beautiful woman. You know I adore you. I assure you, you will be a happy and lucky woman if you marry me."

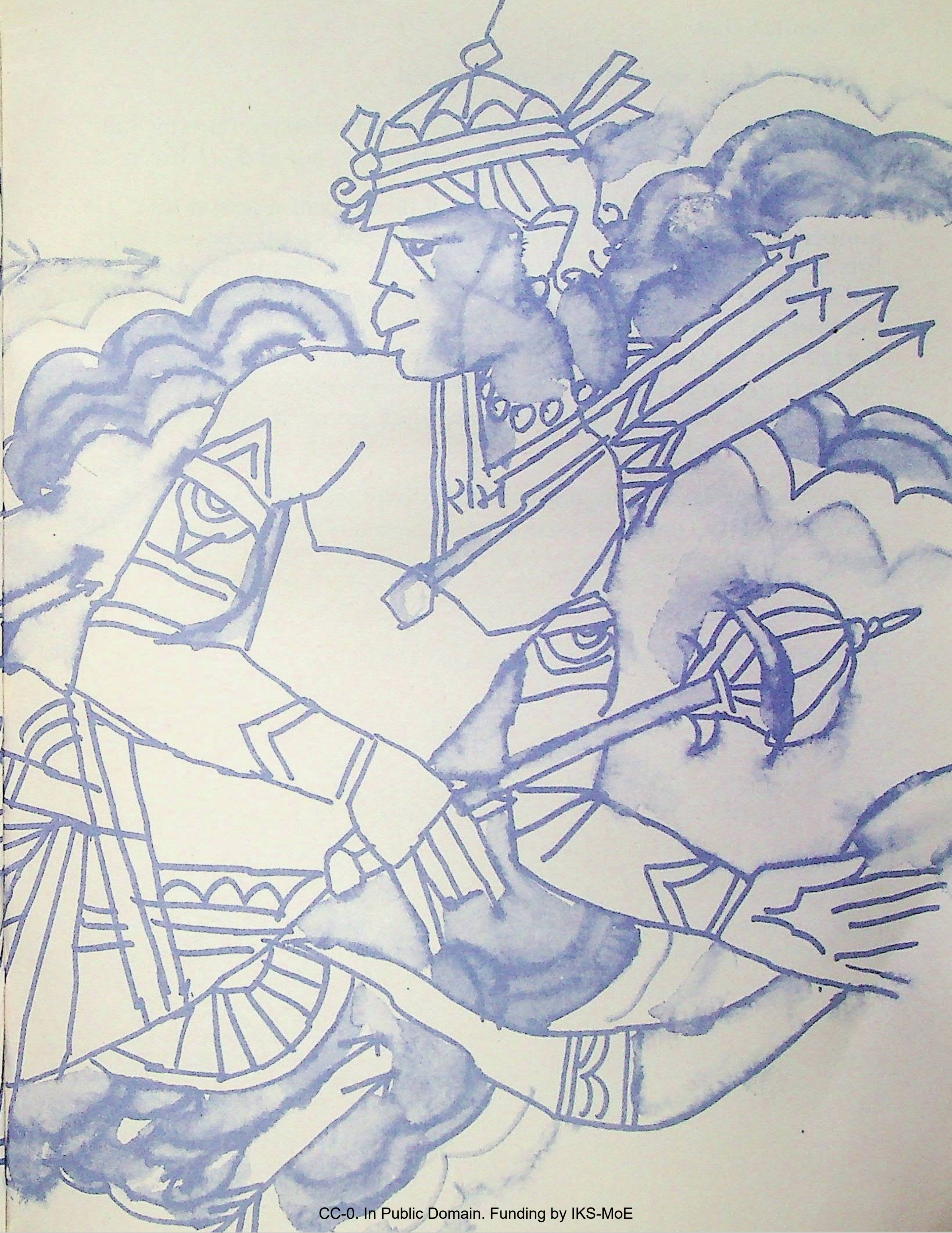
Ravana's favourite queen, Mandodari, came into the garden. She tried hard to persuade him to let Sita go. "You will bring trouble upon all of us," she cried. "Send Sita back, please. It is not late yet. Our kingdom will be destroyed because of you, my lord. If Rama comes here, he will kill all of us. Please send her back at once. Do not hesitate."

"How will Rama come here?" shouted Ravana angrily. "What can he do to me? A mere mortal—Ha! He cannot destroy me or my kingdom. I shall never let Sita go."

After Ravana and his queen went away, Hanuman came down from the tree. "Mother," he said softly, "I have come to Lanka looking for you. Lord Rama has sent me. He is very unhappy that you were carried away by Ravana. He grieves for you and is looking for you day and night. He has sworn to avenge your abduction."

"You have brought a message? From my Lord? How is he? But no, no, how do I know you are not a trickster?" cried Sita. "Do you really know Rama?"





him against that.

"We must not kill a visitor," he said.

"Then we must punish him and teach him a lesson. Burn his tail!" cried Ravana. So the guards caught Hanuman's tail and set fire to it.

"Aha!" thought Hanuman. "I will teach them a lesson too." He jumped from one house to another and as he did so, each house caught fire. Soon the whole city of Lanka was aflame. Suddenly, he wondered if the Ashoka grove was ablaze too? What about Sita? He hoped she was not hurt. So he went to make sure Sita and the grove were safe. By now his tail was really hurting, so he dipped it the sea. The fire was put out and he began to feel better. He rubbed his face with his tail and his face became black with the soot and smoke. Ever since Hanuman's tribe of monkeys have black faces.

Then up he rose, high in the air. The city was still burning below. Laughing at the panic-stricken people, he made himself big and tall again, and began the journey back to Rama.

22

Vibhishana

After Hanuman went away Ravana called his Council of Ministers to discuss what was to be done.

The rakshasas were all very angry. One said, "Your Majesty, this monkey has set fire to Lanka. Did he think we would put up with it?"

"Yes," agreed another. "We must march on them and finish off their whole army."

"We have a very large army," added a third.

"We have thousands of soldiers, all well trained, who can avenge the insult to Lanka," said a fourth.

Only Ravana's brother Vibhishana tried to persuade Ravana to let Sita go. He joined his hands in *anjali* and said, "Your Majesty, my dear, respected brother. You have done wrong and if you continue to be stubborn, Rama will be forced to march upon Lanka to fight and kill you. You will be responsible for the destruction of Lanka and its people. Please send Rama's wife back."

But Ravana did not care to listen to him. "Huh!" he shouted. "Send Sita back now? Why should I send her back? What have I to fear? An army of monkeys? Ha! Ha! Ha!" he laughed.

"Please listen to me," begged Vibhishana. "Rama is said to be the re-incarnation of Lord Vishnu, and has come into the world to punish evil. He has divine power on his side. He has mastered his anger but is determined to fight and win. What harm has he done to the king of the Rakshasas? Surpanakha and Khara taunted him and entered his ashram, and he fought them in self-defence.

"The abduction of Sita is the cause of all our problems. There is still time. If you send Sita back, even now, he may forgive you. It is not too late. Why must you be the cause of the death of so many people, and the ruin of Lanka? Please send Sita back. Ever since you have brought Sita and kept her prisoner, there have been strange omens and signs. The fields are not yielding their grain, the rivers are becoming muddy, jackals and hyenas howl at night. These things did not happen before. I am alarmed and afraid. Surely these are bad signs. Please take heed, my brother, listen to me."

Ravana was beside himself with rage. He kicked Vibhishana and struck him in the chest. Vibhishana fell down unconscious. Ravana's ministers were shocked at his strange behaviour, and they ran to pick up the unconscious Vibhishana.

Later, when Vibhishana recovered, he thought about what he should do. "I cannot live here, not after this," he said to himself. "I shall go and join Lord Rama," he decided. So he bid good-bye to his wife. "Serve Sita, if you can," he told her, "and try to see that no harm comes to her."

He left soon after. Four of Ravana's ministers decided to join him. As they were rakshasas with magical powers, they rose up in the air and flew over the sea. As they neared the land they saw the vanara army. It was really enormous with thousands and thousands of vanaras.

The vanaras also saw Vibhishana and the ministers. "Ah! This must be Ravana coming," they thought. "Kill him! kill him! Let us kill him," they cried.

Vibhishana explained who he was, but the vanaras did not know whether to believe him or not. "Maybe he is lying," they said to Rama. "Don't trust him. Kill him."

"Have you been sent by Ravana?" Lord Rama asked Vibhishana. "I want you to speak the truth."

"No, oh no!" cried Vibhishana. "I have come to serve you. I am Ravana's brother, but I do not want to be with him. I have left him for good. I seek your protection."

Rama was pleased with these words and invited him to stay with them. "If a man asks for my protection, I cannot refuse him. That is my dharma," he said.

Now it was time to attack Lanka, but how was the army going to cross the wide expanse of water? There was one vanara called Nala who had magical powers. If he touched a piece of rock or stone, it would float on water. Rama called him and said, "The other vanaras will bring you stones and logs. You must place them over the water and thus build a bridge so that we can all cross over to Lanka."

Nala was delighted! Lord Rama had chosen him for this work! The others began chopping trees and carrying them to Nala. He would place these on the water and then place rocks on them. The rakshasas watched all this from Lanka, getting extremely apprehensive.... In a month's time the bridge was ready and the vanara army started marching over it. When the rakshasas saw them approaching they were terrified and went running to Ravana.

"Rama's army is crossing over the water," they cried. "They are coming here — into Lanka."

But Ravana did not care. He called one of his rakshasa who had the power to burn to ashes anything upon which he gazed. "Go and burn the whole monkey army!" Ravana ordered.

When Vibhishana saw the rakshasa approaching, he told Rama, "Quick, before he can burn the army, shoot your arrows having mirrors so that when this rakshasa sees his own reflection, he will burn himself to death."

Rama shot his magic arrows and as they reached him, the rakshasa seeing his own reflection in the mirrors, was burnt to ashes. The vanaras let out a joyous cry, "Victory to Lord Rama! Victory!"

When Ravana heard this, he began to get worried. His powerful rakshasa was dead and Rama was crossing into Lanka with his large army.

He sent for two more rakshasas. "Disguise yourself as monkeys," he ordered them, "and go and mingle with the monkey army. Find out their plans and report to me."

The two rakshasas did as they were told. They disguised themselves as vanaras but suddenly they came face to face with Vibhishana who recognized them. "These are Ravana's rakshasas!" he cried. The vanaras at once surrounded them. They gave the two a good beating and tying them, took them to Lord Rama.

Lord Rama, however, was kind to them. "Set them free," he said to the vanaras. "Go back to Lanka," he said to them, "and tell Ravana that he cannot escape punishment for carrying away Sita."

The rakshasas went back to Lanka as fast as they could. "Lord Rama has a large and clever army and he is coming this way. O King, we are really scared."

Ravana listened to them and sat deep in thought for some time. Then he called another cunning and bold rakshasa. "Go!" he ordered. "Find out the enemy's plans."

He too, tried to mingle with the vanara army but failed. He was beaten up by the vanaras and returned limping to Lanka. "Oh King Ravana!" he cried. "Please take care. Lord Rama's army is really clever and strong."

23

Angad

Rama was ready to attack Lanka and the vanaras were getting very restless but he thought he would give Ravana one last chance. He called Angad and told him to go and speak to Ravana. Angad was thrilled. Lord Rama had chosen him for this important task. Happily he jumped up, leaped over the stones and boulders and reached Lanka.

He boldly entered the palace and stood facing the ten-headed Ravana as he sat on his richly decorated throne. "Who are you?" thundered Ravana.

"I am Angad," he replied. "I have come to warn you. Even now it is not too late. Let Sita return to her husband."

"How dare you?" shouted Ravana. "How dare you, a mere monkey, come here into my palace and threaten me?"

"Yes," replied Angad. "If you do not return Sita, Lord Rama will be forced to wage war upon you with his divine weapons. You will be defeated, and Lanka will be destroyed. Think before you let this beautiful city be completely reduced to ashes."

Ravana was beside himself with rage. He came down from his throne and caught hold of Angad. "I will tear this miserable monkey to pieces!" he shouted. Angad jumped quickly out of Ravana's reach making him all the more furious. Finally, he jumped up and leapt over the walls, and made his way to Lord Rama who was very pleased to see him.

"Lanka is a beautiful city," related Angad. "I met Ravana in his palace. I tried to persuade him but the ten-headed demon king would not repent."

In the meantime, after Angad had gone, Ravana called his son Indrajit, who had special, divine weapons and had once defeated even Lord Indra. Hence the name Indrajit.

"Indrajit, my son," said Ravana, "this monkey Angad, has humiliated and insulted me before all my subjects. I want you to kill him and I also want you to kill Rama and Lakshmana. Only their deaths will give me peace. I know *you* can kill Rama and Lakshmana and destroy the whole monkey army."

24

Indrajit

Indrajit set about obeying his father. He gathered about him a large number of rakshasa warriors, and rode out of Lanka in his chariot. When the vanaras saw the huge rakshasa army approaching they fought back fiercely. They threw stones at them, wrestled and hit them with fists. The younger, smaller vanaras hit them with sticks and branches which they broke off the trees, and scratched them when they could.

Suddenly, Indrajit and Angad came face to face. "I will not spare you!" shouted Indrajit. "You have insulted, humiliated and threatened my father, the great King of Lanka, and dared to challenge him. Who do you think you are? I shall snuff you out, as one snuffs out a candle!"

"I shall not let you go either," replied Angad bravely, taking a big rock and hurling it at Indrajit. The rock flew straight at Indrajit and nearly killed him. However, he recovered quickly and stood up, and flying upwards, hid behind a cloud. From there he started showering arrows on the vanara army. Many were fatally wounded and fell on the ground in large numbers. Angad and the other vanaras began to worry. What were they to do? How could they fight an invisible enemy?

Meanwhile, Indrajit was very happy. From behind the cloud he could see the vanaras dying but they could not see him. Rama and Lakshmana were still alive. He hadn't killed them yet. His father wanted them dead. "Only when they are dead, will I be happy," Ravana had said.

I shall shoot the serpent darts, thought Indrajit and he shot his special serpent darts at Rama and Lakshmana. They whizzed through the air and pierced their bodies. Rama and Lakshmana fell down in a faint as the snake poison began seeping into their bodies. Indrajit was very pleased with himself. "I have done what my father wanted me to do," he thought, as he rode back happily in his chariot to Lanka. He told his father what he had accomplished.

Ravana was very glad to see that his son had returned victorious. "Well done, my son," he cried. "Well done. I knew you would be successful. Now, if Rama and Lakshmana are both dead, we don't have to worry about anything anymore."

Meanwhile, Rama and Lakshmana were lying unconscious. Garuda, the king of birds came flying towards them. As soon as the serpents saw Garuda, they left Rama and Lakshmana and began to slide away because all serpents were afraid of Garuda. As the serpents slithered away, Rama and Lakshmana began to feel better. Garuda came near them and fanned them with his wings. Both brothers sat up.

"Thank you, Garuda," said Rama. "You have really helped us and saved our lives."

"I am only too happy to have this opportunity to serve you," replied Garuda. Then he flew away.

Meanwhile, Ravana, sitting on his throne in his palace was overjoyed. Indrajit, his son had just returned from the battlefield with the good news that he had used the snake darts to kill both Rama and Lakshmana.... The wailing of the vanaras could be heard even in the palace!

Ravana rose and embraced the handsome Indrajit. "You have done me proud," he said happily. "I knew that you could rout the vanara army and kill those Ayodhyan princes. Now I have nothing to fear from anyone—neither from those two mortals nor from those annoying monkeys. Now I shall make Sita submit to my will too. Who can defy Ravana?" he boasted, his chest swelling with pride.

After a little while, however, Ravana and his rakshasas heard joyful shouts from the vanara army. Why were they exultant? What had happened to make them so happy? Surely Rama and Lakshmana had not come back to life? No, no that was impossible. Then what was it? Ravana began to feel a strange sort of fear. He called his rakshasas and ordered them to go and quickly find out the cause.

They returned to tell Ravana that Rama and Lakshmana had indeed come back to life. Ravana was shocked. How could they be alive? No one ever lived after being pierced by the serpent darts. Ravana stroked his chin thoughtfully. What was he to do now? He sent more rakshasas to fight with the vanaras but Sugriva, Angad, Hanuman and Nala defeated all of them. They struck the demons with their maces and smashed their skulls with uprooted trees. News of their death soon reached Ravana.

Ravana called his Council of Ministers and told them, "This is a very strange and fearful situation—that an army of my rakshasas should be vanquished by mere monkeys! It is unbelievable. He turned to his Chief Minister, Prahasta, "Now only you, Indrajit, Kumbhakaran and I can defeat them."

Prahasta led a horde of huge, strong-limbed rakshasas and confronted the vanaras. Again a terrible battle ensued, with the demons emitting loud war-cries and the vanaras hurling rocks at them. Prahasta and the demons perished. When the news was brought to Ravana, he thought to himself, "Now I shall have to send Kumbhakaran. Go wake up Kumbhkaran!" he ordered. "Wake him up. He must go to the battle-field. No one can escape the mighty Kumbhakaran. He shall bring us victory."

25

Kumbhakaran

Kumbhakaran was Ravana's brother. He was an enormous rakshasa who slept for six months and woke only for one day, after which he ate, and went back to sleep again for six months. He had been granted many boons by Brahma and of course all the rakshasas believed he was invincible.

The demons ran to his palace to awaken him, but it was not at all easy. They made noises, called out his name, struck the ground with sticks and branches. They even brought drums and beat them. They brought out the war conches and blew into them; they used their trumpets, struck gongs, made loud noises with their big brass bells but still Kumbhakaran slept.

They pulled his hair, pinched and pumelled him, but to no avail. Then they brought delicious and fragrant food. The fragrance wafted up out of the dishes up to his nostrils. At last, Kumbhakaran stirred!

He loved food and needed so much of it. He was so huge. Sitting up, he looked around bleary-eyed and gazed at all the food before him; but before eating he asked, "What is the matter? Has anything happened to Lanka or to Ravana? Why have you woken me up?"

The demons told him what had happened. "I shall avenge the insult to my brother," he roared. "Today I shall eat a thousand monkeys and let Lanka feed upon the entire monkey army." Then he fell upon the food and finished it all in a matter of seconds. He drank gallons of water and, collecting his huge mace, uttered a blood-curdling cry and strode out, covering enormous distances with his massive strides. Rama and Lakshmana saw him coming in amazement and asked Vibhishana, "Who is this enormous demon?"

"This is the mighty Kumbhakaran," Vibhishana told them, "to whom Brahma has granted many boons."

As Kumbhakaran advanced, he trampled many vanaras. He threw some aside as if they were feathers and some he chewed and swallowed. The vanaras fled as best as they could. Sugriva tried to attack him, but Kumbhakaran picked him up easily and threw him over his shoulders and then dashed him to the ground.

"If Sugriva is killed, all will be lost," thought Hanuman. "I must do what I can to save him."

In the meantime, Sugriva recoverd and clawed Kumbhakaran really hard. He tore off his ears and nose and, darting between his legs, ran to Rama and placed the torn ears and nose at Rama's feet. Kumbhakaran roared with pain and anger. A mere miserable monkey had clawed off his ears and nose! He would show them. As he lunged forward, Rama said, "Come royal rakshasa, I am here. I shall challenge you."

"Is it Rama himself?" thought Kumbhakaran, as he lunged forward shaking the earth. Rama used his arrows carefully and then with one divine arrow killed Kumbhakaran. Kumbhakaran's head rolled like a huge boulder over the earth and even as he fell, he crushed hundreds of poor vanaras to death.

26

Indrajit Goes to War Again

When Ravana heard that Kumbhakaran was dead he nearly collapsed. After a while he recovered, but he wondered what to do. All his best warrior-rakshasas were dead. He had been very certain that Kumbhakaran would return victorious, and that he would slay those two exiled princes of Ayodhya, but instead Kumbhakaran had died at their hands. There was only one person he could send to fight with Rama and Lakshmana again and that was his beloved son Indrajit. He gave orders to lock all the gates of Lanka, and then summoned Indrajit.

"My dear, beloved son," he said. "There is no one left to salvage my honour and that of Lanka. Only you are left. You are brave and invincible. I cannot bear to think that we are being routed by a wretched monkey army."

"Do not fear my father, I shall go and finish off the entire monkey army and slay those two princes as well."

So saying, Indrajit donned his armour and climbed into his chariot. The sun shone resplendent on him as his chariot, drawn by four horses, rattled onto the battlefield. Indrajit shot arrow after arrow and vanaras fell dead in hundreds. Then Indrajit took out the Brahmastra—the divine weapon he had been given by Lord Indra himself. He shot this powerful and deadly weapon at Rama and Lakshmana. Both the princes fell down in an unearthly stupor. Then Indrajit continued showering arrows left and right and soon nearly all the vanaras were lying half-dead on the ground—all except Vibhishana who being a rakshasa could not be killed by Indrajit's arrow, Hanuman who had the gift of immortality and a few others.

"What shall we do now?" asked Vibhishana. He was very worried. Jambavan asked him to call Hanuman.

"Quick, Hanuman there is no time to lose," said Jambavan. "You are the only one who can save Rama and Lakshmana and the entire vanara army now. Fly at once to the Himalayas. There, on the Mount Kailash peak, you will find four medicinal herbs which alone can heal them. Please bring them quickly. You *must* return before sunrise."

Hanuman, at once, grew in size and jumped high into the air. With one big leap he was on his way to the mountain peak. What an important mission! His heart swelled with pride as he flew.

Drawing near Mount Kailash, he saw a strange light emanating from it. Going nearer, Hanuman noticed the light coming from some herbs growing there.

"These must be the very herbs I have come to collect," he thought.

He bent to gather them but the plants began to shrivel up at the alien touch. What could he do? He had to take the herbs back with him. Hanuman quickly grabbed the whole mountain peak and holding it in his hands, jumped up into the air. He flew swiftly back to Lanka. It was not yet morning and Vibhishana was delighted to see him. Hanuman took the herbs first to Rama and Lakashmana and held them to their nostrils. As soon as they inhaled the fragrance, the two princes awoke and sat up. Then Hanuman went quickly from one vanara to another, watching them recovering with happy surprise.

On the battlefield, Lakshmana and Indrajit faced each other again. Lakshmana shot four sharp-tipped arrows that killed the four gold-caparisoned horses. Indrajit's chariot began to wobble. Lakshmana shot yet another arrow that cut off the head of the charioteer. Indrajit 's heart sank. However, he held up his bow to shoot an arrow at Lakshmana. Just then an arrow from Lakshmana flew sharply and split Indrajit's bow into two. Indrajit quickly took another bow and was stringing it when three arrows from Lakshmana split the bow into three pieces. Then five more arrows... and Indrajit fell onto the ground bleeding profusely. Lakshmana held up his bow and shot one last divine weapon. Indrajit collapsed and his handsome, severed head rolled onto the field and beyond his chariot.

The vanaras shouted joyously, "Victory to Rama! Victory to Lord Rama!"

The loud and joyous cries reached the ears of Ravana at the same time that Ravana's rakshasas ran to break the horrible news to him. Ravana fell down unconscious.... His son Indrajit was dead ? He recovered soon after, but his heart and body were cold and numb.

27

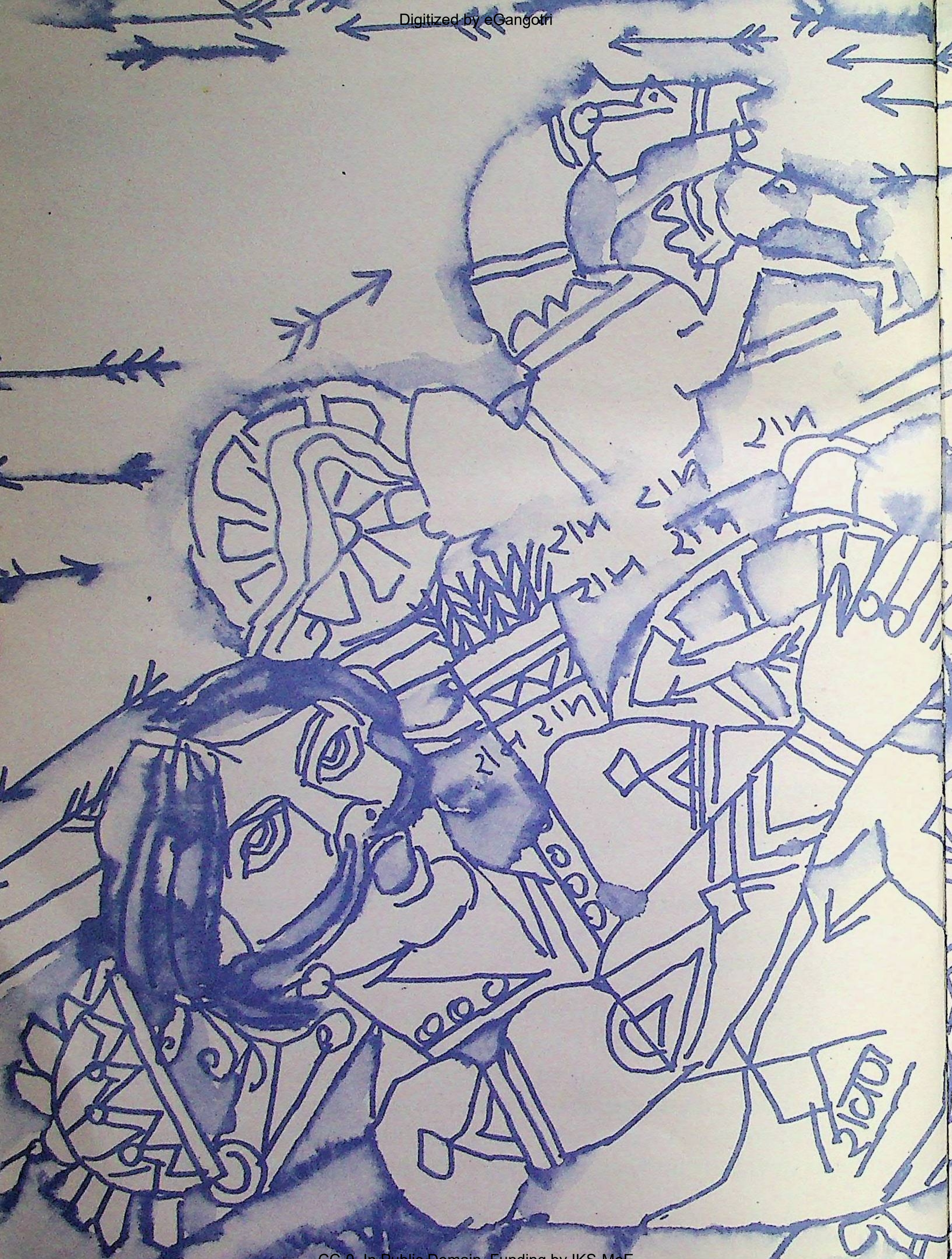
Death of Ravana

After a while, Ravana gathered courage. There was now no one to go to war for him. All his best warriors, generals, brothers and his favourite son were dead. But there was still the rakshasa army, he thought. He would lead them onto the battlefield himself. How had Rama, Lakshmana and the vanaras come back to life after being shot, while his own rakshasas had died?

Donning his shining armour and his jewelled crown, he drove in his chariot to the battlefield, followed by hundreds of rakshasas. Seeing him for the first time, Rama and Lakshmana gazed at the splendour of Ravana's chariot, his crown and his clothes.

Ravana took out arrow after arrow from his quiver and began to shoot them at Rama and Lakshmana, but all of them were split in mid-air by Lakshmana's arrows.

Meanwhile, the rakshasas continued killing the vanaras in hundreds. Ravana pushed Lakshmana aside and came face to face with Rama. Since both were skilled warriors and had divine weapons, the battle between them was one between two equals. It was a rare sight. The earth trembled and shook... animals shuddered with fear and hid in trees, in valleys and behind rocks, as the two battled with each other....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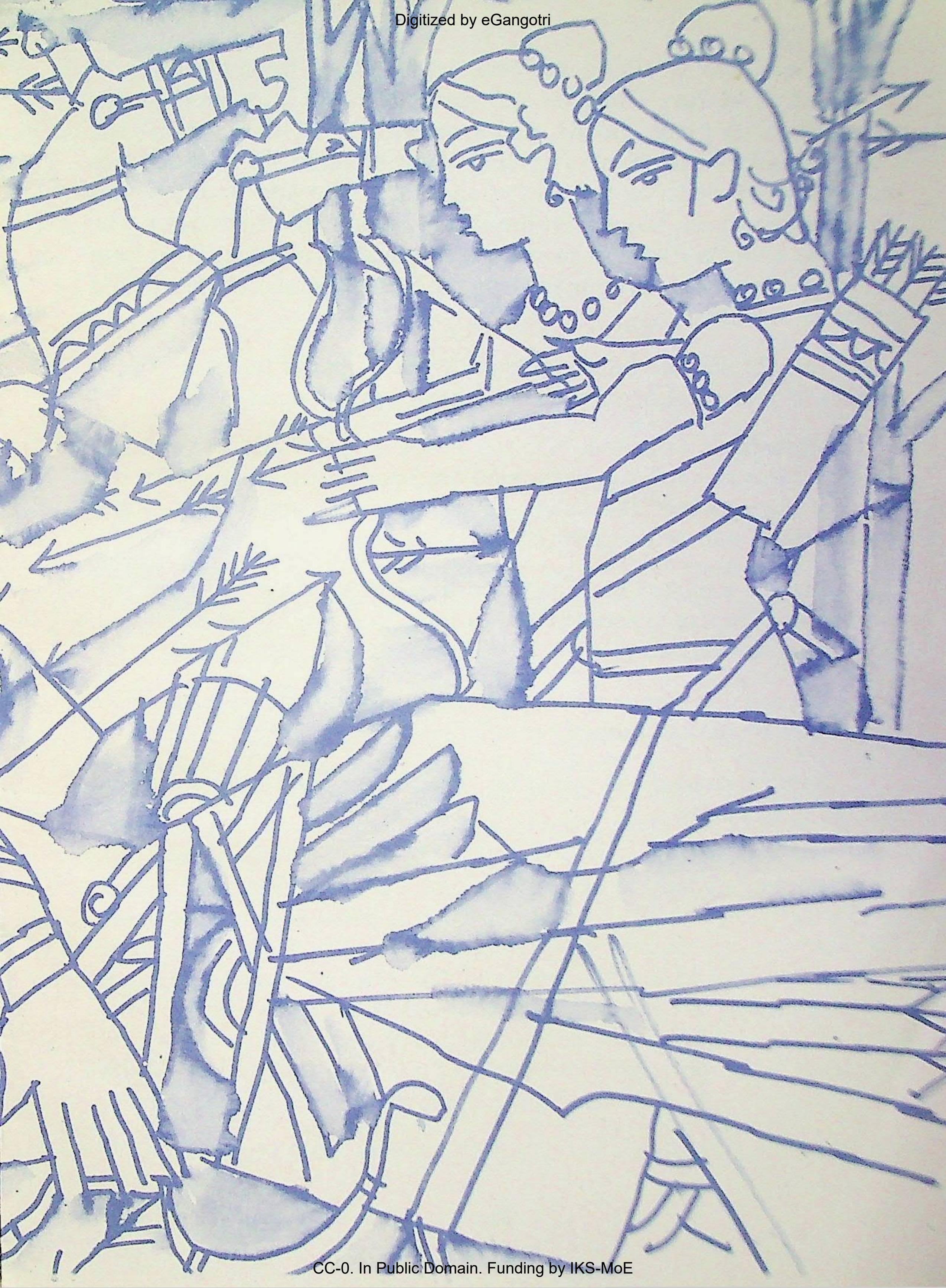


Ravana was like a raging tempest, while Rama fought with self-contained, cold fury. He shot off Ravana's head, but another one appeared in its place. Finally, Rama hurled the divine weapon—the Brahmastra. With the speed of lighting it hurtled across the vast distance between them, dazzling the eyes of all on the field and with a sound like thunder, struck Ravana on the chest. Ravana fell down dead. The rakshasas could not believe their eyes. It was all so sudden. Their king who was invincible was lying there on the battlefield, slain by the exiled prince of Ayodhya.

They broke into loud wailing. Ravana's queens too came to the battlefield and wept as they saw the great Ravana dead.

Vibhishana wept too. "Oh my brother!" he cried. "How many times did I warn you? You never paid any heed to my advice. Why did you not listen to me? See what you have brought upon yourself and thousands of our rakshasas?"

Rama comforted him, and told him not to weep for what had happened. "Prepare to perform his last rites," he said, "for he has no son left to perform them."

Ravana was then arrayed in his kingly robes and his last rites were performed by Vibhishana....

Rama sprinkled holy water on Vibhishana's head and proclaimed him King of Lanka.

28

Sita's Ordeal

When Sita, in the Ashoka grove, heard of the death of Ravana and of Rama's victory, she wept with joy. "At last!" she thought. "At last the war is over and my husband has won. Now I shall go back to him."

Vibhishana came to fetch her. "Devi, holy mother," he said. "Lord Rama would like you to come to him."

Sita, bathed, perfumed and decked with jewels, sat in the palanquin and was brought to where Rama waited. She looked as beautiful as ever. The sad, long months she had spent in Lanka had not dimmed her beauty. Even her face glowed, radiant with inner beauty and unbounded joy. A little distance from where Rama stood, she stepped out of the palanquin and walked up to him. The rakshasas and vanaras who were alive watched with awe and wonder. This was the princess of Ayodhya for whom such a long and bloody war had been fought and so many had died. Sita bent and touched Rama's feet. He looked at her with undiminished love in his heart. Yet, he was also filled with sadness. He knew she had been chaste and faithful to him, through all the tortured months she had spent in Lanka, but what would his people say? How could he receive her back openly?

"Princess Sita," he said. "I have won you back. I have waged a war successfully and have wiped out the insult and wrong done to you. I have killed my enemy, established my manhood, and like a true Kshatriya prince, the honour of my noble family... "And then he added in a slow, pensive voice, "However, you have lived almost a year in another man's house and, I feel I cannot accept you back. How can I?... You are free to go wherever and with whomsoever you wish."

Lakshmana bit his lips in anger when he heard this, but he dared not say anything. Sita was shocked, aghast, just as were those who stood around and heard Rama's cruel and unbelievable words.

Tears coursed down Sita's face. Could her husband really have spoken to her like that? Before thousands of people who stood to watch and listen? She felt utterly humiliated.

"Oh my lord!" she said. "I cannot believe that you can speak to me like that. Do you not know the illustrious family I come from? Do you know that I have lived only for you and that I have been faithful to you in thought, word and deed? Oh brother Lakshmana, I cannot live with this stigma. Prepare a fire for me. I shall enter it and the gods will be my witness. If I am innocent and pure, I shall emerge untouched by the flames."

Unhappily, Lakshmana collected wood and lit the fire Sita with her hands folded in *anjali* went round Rama and entered the fire. The flames leapt up high and for a while nothing but the fire could be seen. Then suddenly, the flames died down, and the people saw Sita emerge, just as she had entered it. Not a single hair, not a thread of her garments had been burnt by the fire. The people gasped with relief and happiness.

"Devi, illustrious princess," said Rama. "I knew in my heart that you were pure and chaste; but I knew also that in the minds of others there could be suspicions and doubts about you... but you have proved to them your purity and chastity. There is none equal to you in grace and goodness. So, come with me...."

29

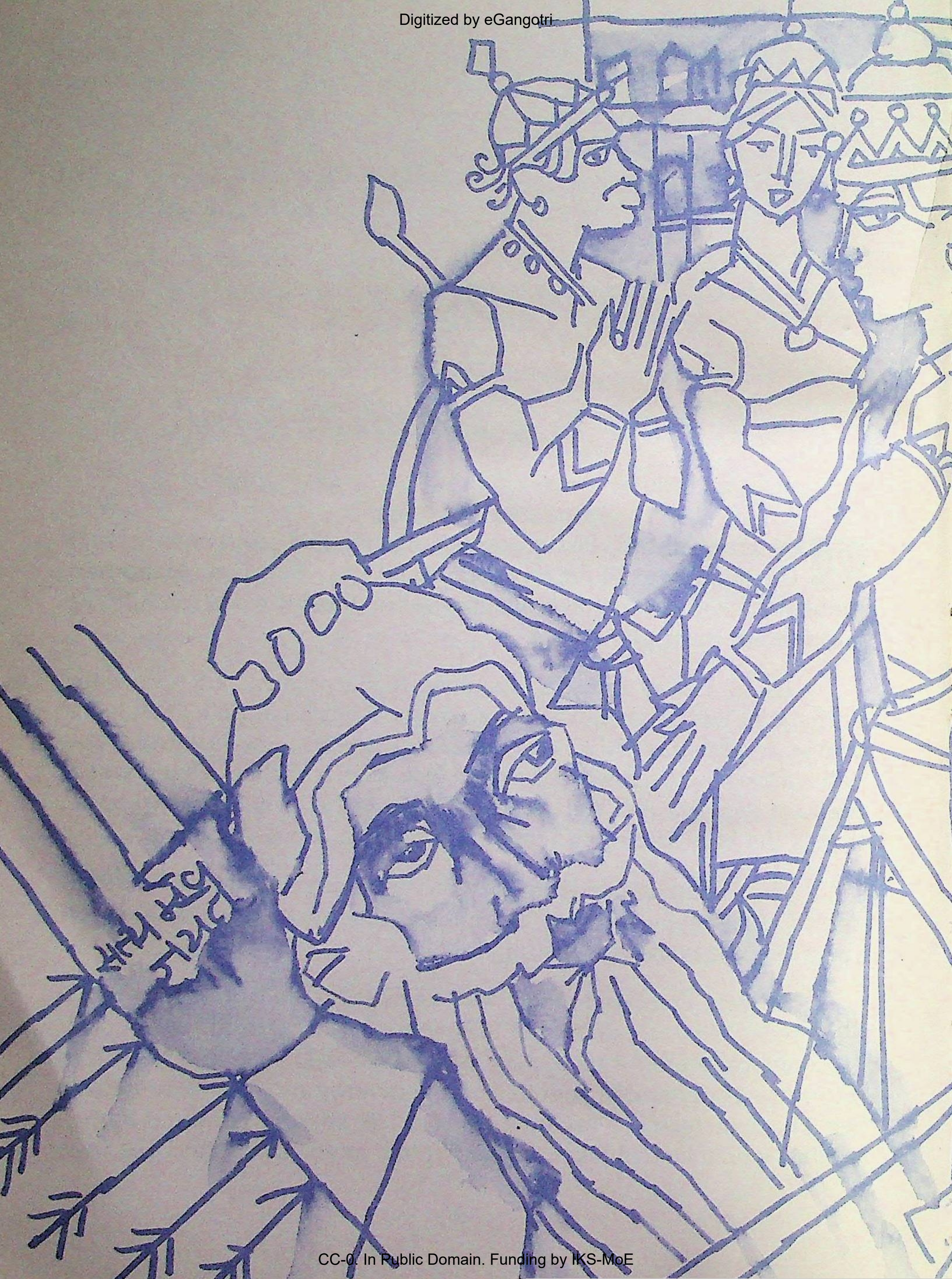
Rama is Crowned King

The aerial chariot, Pushpaka was then readied to carry them back to Ayodhya. Rama, Lakshmana, Sita, Sugriva, Hanuman, Vibhishana and several other vanaras sat in it and it rose gracefully up into the air, drawn by swans.

As they flew towards Ayodhya, Rama pointed out to Sita the bridge that had been built by the vanaras. "Look!" he cried, "that is the bridge... and that is Kishkinda where I met Sugriva... this is where I slew Vali.... Down below is where Lakshman and I met Shabari. That is where the sage Agastya had his ashram.... 'There is the river Godavari and... that is the beautiful river Sarayu and there at last is Ayodhya."

The Pushpaka landed gently on Ayodhyan soil. Bharata and the nobles of Ayodhya hastened out to meet the royal party. The fourteen years of exile were over at last....

Bharata embraced Rama and Lakshmana and bowed to touch Sita's feet. "How wonderful it is to have you back, my brothers!" he said. "I have looked after Ayodhya for you as best as I could. Today I return it to you--your palaces, your treasury, your army and your store-houses. See, I have increased everything ten-fold." So saying he brought Rama's sandals which he had taken earlier to place on the throne and put them



on Rama's feet....

The coronation took place and all the citizens of Ayodhya rejoiced. After many years, the city wore a happy and festive look again. Bells and conches were heard, flowers strewn in the streets. Shatrughna carried the royal umbrella, and Sugriva waved the yak-tail fan. Vibhishana waved another fan which was pearly-white.... Rama and Sita were installed King and Queen of Ayodhya amidst the chanting of mantras by the rishis. Rama ruled the country wisely for many years and his subjects were happy and contented....

Even today, Rama is considered as an embodiment of the self-sacrificing, dedicated king... and *Ram-Rajya,* as an ideal and cherished era.

Reference List of Characters

AHALYA : wife of rishi Gautama. He had cursed her and she turned to stone.

ANGAD : the son of the vanara king, Vali.

BHARADVAJA : a sage who had an ashram that Rama visited.

BHARATA : prince of Ayodhya, son of King Dasharatha.

DASHARATHA : King of Ayodhya, father of Rama, Bharata, Lakshmana and Shatrughna

GARUDA : the king of birds, who helped revive (bring back to life) Rama and Lakshmana.

GAUTAMA : husband of Ahalya, a rishi or sage.

GUHA : tribal chief, who offered hospitality to Rama during exile.

HANUMAN : the vanara with extraordinary strength, who could fly, change in size at will and who had the gift of immortality.

INDRAJIT : son of Ravana, who had defeated the god Indra. Also known as Meghnath.

JAMBAVAN : chief of bears, helped Rama.

JATAYU : an enormous bird, who died while trying to protect Sita.

KAIKEYI : queen of Dasharatha, mother of Bharata.

KABANDHA : a heavenly being who had been turned into a headless monster. He was liberated by Rama.

KAUSHALYA : queen of Dasharatha, mother of Rama.

KHARA and Dushan : demons, brothers of Ravana and Surpanakha

LAKSHMANA : prince of Ayodhya, brother of Rama, son of Queen Sumitra.

MANDODARI : chief queen of Ravana, the king of Lanka

MANTHARA : hunch-backed maid of Queen Kaikeyi.

MARICHA : a demon (rakshasa) who turned himself into a golden deer at Ravana's behest

NALA OR NILA : a vanara blessed with the magical power of making anything he touched float on water.

RAMA : prince of Ayodhya, eldest son of King Dasharatha and Queen Kaushalaya

SAMPAATI : an enormous bird, brother of Jatayu.

SHABARI : a low caste woman who was visited and honoured by Rama for her devotional fervour.

SHRAVAN : the devoted son of blind parents.

SHATRUGHNA : prince of Ayodhya, brother of Rama, son of Queen Sumitra

SURPANAKHA	: rakshasi sister of King Ravana of Lanka
SITA	: daughter of King Janaka, wife of Rama.
SUGRIVA	: king of vanaras, brother of Vali.
SUMANTRA	: Chief Minister of King Dasharatha.
SUMITRA	: queen of Dasharatha, mother of Lakshmana and Shatrughna.
SURASA	: mother of the snakes, who tried to obstruct Hanuman when he was going to Lanka.
TARA	: wife of Vali, king of the vanaras, mother of Angad.
TARAKA	: or Tataka a she-demon who terrorised the forest and was killed by Rama
VALI	: king of the vanaras, brother of Sugriva
VIBHISHANA	: younger brother of Ravana who joined Rama, then was crowned king of Lanka after Ravana's death.
VISHNU	: a Hindu god—the preserver
VISHWAMITRA	: a sage who had done a great deal of tapasya.

Comprehension Exercises

Chapter 1

Vocabulary

mythology — the study of myths.
arrogant — aggressively assertive, presumptuous

Questions

1. What was the boon that Brahma granted Ravana and why?
2. Describe the episode which inspired Valmiki to write the Ramayana.
3. Who wrote "Rama Charit Manas" and in which language?

Chapter 2

Vocabulary

pondering — thinking over
strewn — scattered
mantras — special religious stanzas or verses for recitation

Questions

1. Enact the scene of the *yagna* in your classroom? How much Payasam was given to each of the three queens?
2. What was the name of the four princes?
3. Who was the light of King Dasharatha's eyes?

Chapter 3

Vocabulary

contemplating — thinking of
hermitage (ashram) — a place where sages, hermits and men doing tapasya or penance lived
terrorises — causes great fear
trance — a sleeplike state
predicted -- forecast

Questions

1. Who was Vishwamitra?
2. Why were the courtiers afraid when King Dasharatha did not want Rama to accompany him?

Chapter 4

Vocabulary

enormous — extremely large

Questions

1. What were the special characteristics of the bow of Shiva?
2. What was the promise King Janaka had made?

Chapter 5

Vocabulary

wails — loud plaintive cries
furrow — narrow groove made by a plough in a field
reverberating — echoing loudly

Questions

1. How did King Janaka find Sita?
2. Who picked up the bow at Mithila and what happened?

Chapter 6

Vocabulary

install — to place in position (as put on the throne)
appraised — informed
chaste — pure
boon — request or wish

Questions

1. What were king Dashratha's plans for Rama?
2. What did the maid Manthara tell Queen Kaikeyi?

Chapter 7

Vocabulary

staggered — moved unsteadily
adamant — stubborn
reiterate — repeat
wan — pale

Question

1. What were the two boons Kaikeyi asked for?
2. What was the curse? Find out more about the story of Shravan Kumar. Enact it as a play in your classroom.

Chapter 8

Vocabulary

machinations — evil designs, plans
scheming — planning evilly

Questions

1. What did Lakshmana advise Rama to do?
2. Did Rama fulfill his father's promise?
3. Who decided to go with Rama?
4. What was the name of Lakshman's wife? Did she also accompany him to the forest?

Chapter 9

Vocabulary

plunged	— fell into
grasping	— taking greedily
salutations	— greetings

Questions

1. Where were Bharata and Shatrughna when their father died?
2. What did Sumantra do?
3. What did Bharata decide to do?

Chapter 10

Vocabulary

luxury	— abundance of good, expensive things
vigil	— to keep a watch over someone
relieved	— made free from fear or worry

Questions

1. Who was Guha?
2. Why couldn't Rama accept Guha's gifts?

Chapter 11

Vocabulary

rightful	— proper
regent	— one who rules in place of the monarch

Questions

1. Who went with Bharata to look for Rama?
2. Why did Bharata take Rama's sandals with him?

Chapter 12

Vocabulary

surroundings	— all the area that is around

Questions

1. Why did they leave Chitrakoot?
2. Who was Jatayu?

Chapter 13

Vocabulary

hurled — thrown with force
humiliation — made to feel low, abasing

Questions

1. Who was Surpanakha and what did she do?
2. Who were Khara and Dushana?

Chapter 14

Vocabulary

imitate — to copy
excellent — very good indeed

Questions

1. Who was Maricha and why did Ravana go to him?
2. Why did he not dare to disobey Ravana?

Chapter 15

Vocabulary

bhiksha — food given to sanyasis
confused — all mixed up
springing — jumping up

Questions

1. What did Lakshmana do when Sita commanded him to go and look for Rama?
2. Why did Sita want to give food to the sanyasi?

Chapter 16

Vocabulary

protected — taken care of
bled — felt very bad for him (his heart bled for him—figurative speech)
ascetic — hermit, sage

Questions

1. Where was Jatayu when Ravana carried away Sita ? What did he do to help her?
2. Why did Sita throw her jewels and call out?

Chapter 17

Vocabulary

retreat — place of seclusion
hillock — a low hill

Questions

1. Who was Hanuman? What supernatural powers did he possess?
2. Why did Lakshmana not recognize Sita's jewels?

Chapter 18

Vocabulary

foaming — frothing and coming up with a lot of foam
trepidation — an involuntary trembling
oozing — slowly sleeping out

Questions

1. Why had Vali driven Sugriva out of Kishkinda?
2. How did Rama differentiate Sugriva from Vali during their fight?

Chapter 19

Vocabulary

lamented — cry with sorrow
lose heart — lose courage
dazzling — very bright, so bright that the eyes cannot rest on it
horrified — filled with horror
perplexed — puzzled
contrary — opposite
entrails — intestines etc.

Questions

1. How was Sampaati related to Jatayu? Why did he have no wings?
2. How and why was Hanuman blessed with magical powers?

Chapter 20

Vocabulary

impregnable — that which cannot be entered, like a city or a fort
assailed — conquered
indestructible — that which cannot be destroyed
spurned — repel, reject with disdain

Questions

1. What was the prophecy regarding Lanka?
2. Why did Hanuman not enter through the gate?
3. What did Ravana's queen advise him to do?

Chapter 21

Vocabulary

thundered — talked or shouted very loudly
abduction — kidnapping

Questions

1. Why was it difficult to catch Hanuman?
2. Why did Vibhishana advise Ravana not to kill Hanuman?
3. Ask your teacher to read out portions of *Lanka-Dahan* from Tulsidas' Rama Charit Manas in the Hindi class.

Chapter 22

Vocabulary

re-incarnation — born in another form in another life
omens — signs from heaven about coming events
taunted — teased in a bad or mean way
apprehensive — afraid

Questions

1. What did Vibhishana advise Ravana to do?
2. Who was Nala? How did he help Rama?
3. Why did Rama accept Vibhishana? Was it an act of dharma?

Chapter 23

Vocabulary

restless — with no peace
humiliated — made to feel low or small

Question

1. Who was Angad? What did he do?

Chapter 24

Vocabulary

seeping — creeping into, usually liquid flowing into a crack or hole.

done me proud — made me very proud
emitted — uttered or let out
ensued — happen afterwards, results
slithered — glided away, usually a snake or a serpent
rout — to conquer, to defeat
exultant — extremely happy
confronted — faced
horde — enormous crowd

Questions

1. Who was Indrajit? Why was Ravana so proud of him?
2. How did Garuda help Rama and Lakshmana?

Chapter 25

Vocabulary

invincible — one who cannot be defeated
bleary-eyed — sleepy-eyed
pumelled — hit hard and push with the hands

Question

1. How was Kumbhakaran different from the other demons?

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Chapter 26

Vocabulary

emanating -- coming out of
caparisoned — dressed in rich and colourful clothing usually said about horses and elephants

Questions

1. Why did Hanuman go to the Himalayas?
2. Who killed Indrajit?
3. You must have seen three effigies being burnt during the Dussehra celebrations. Can you name them?

Chapter 27

Vocabulary

shuddered — shook with fear
self-contained — calm, keeping one's feeling to oneself

Question

1. How did Ravana die?

Chapter 28

Vocabulary

palanquin — a chair in which royal or important persons were carried
unbounded — endless
undiminished — not having become less

Question

1. Why did Sita want to enter the fire?

Chapter 29

Vocabulary

embodiment — to be an expression of
dedicated — loyal, having integrity
cherished — value, hold dear
installed — placed in office in colourful or regal ceremony

Question

1. Was Rama's installation a happy occasion? Describe the scene in Ayodhya at the time of Ram's *Abhishek*?

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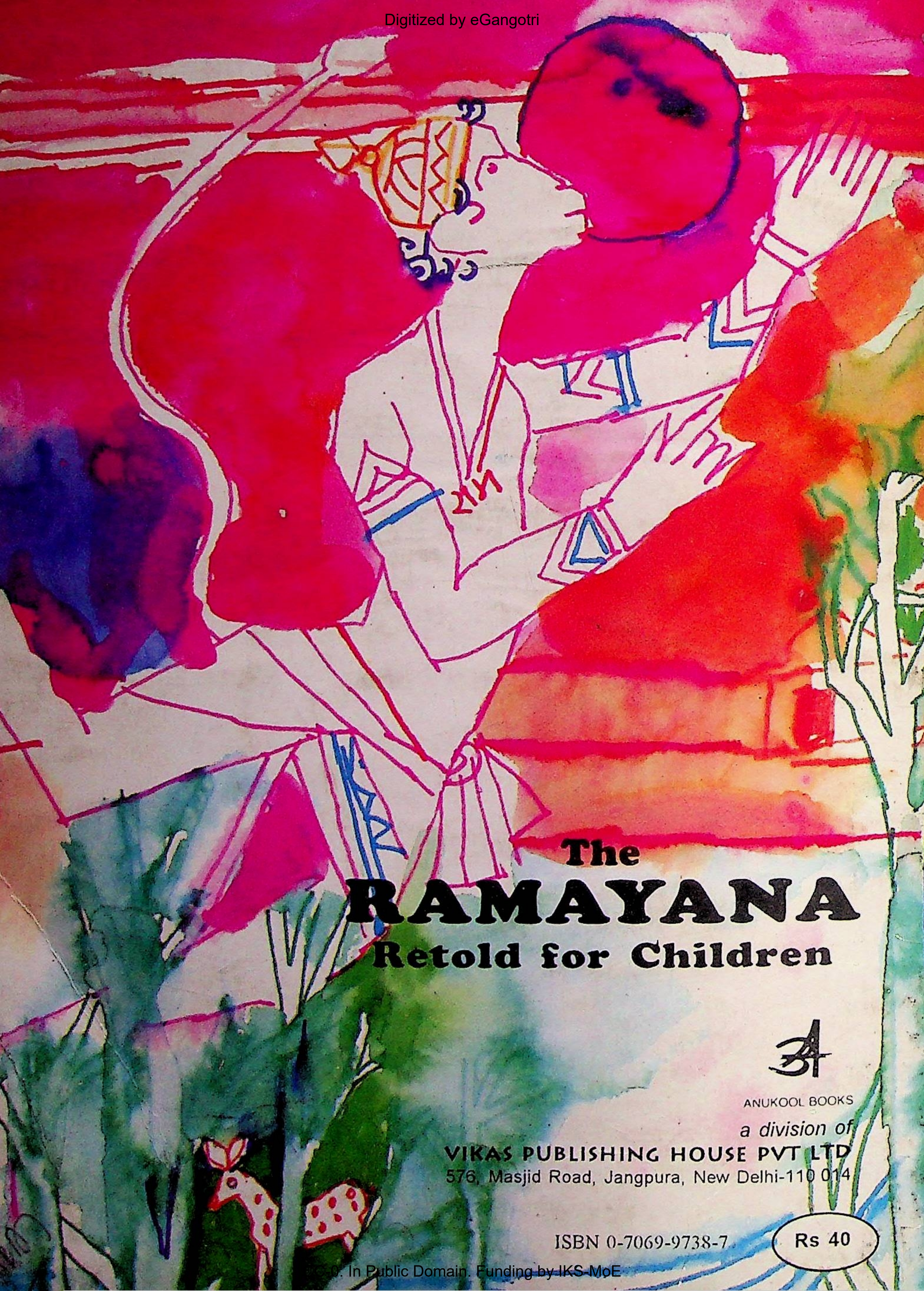

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